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Dublin's Dadaist: Brian O'Nolan, the European Avant-Garde and Irish Cultural Production

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

Birkbeck College, University of London

December 2020

Declaration

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit is given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Signed:

Tobias Harris

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A version of chapter one of this thesis has previously been published by the candidate as ‘*Blather, Razzle and Dada: Contextualizing Brian O’Nolan’s Early Journalism*’ in *Modernist Cultures*, 14.2 (May 2019), 151–72.

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Abstract

Brian O’Nolan, who wrote variously as Brother Barnabas, The O’Blather, Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, Myles na Gopaleen, George Knowall or under one of many other guises, now occupies a central position in twentieth-century Irish literature. The lasting influence of his novels, *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, stretches across contemporary experimental and comic writing. The previous decade saw a succession of conferences, monographs and edited collections devoted to the field of O’Nolan studies. This thesis participates in the ongoing expansion of the locus of critical attention in the field, as scholarly interest evolves from an early focus on O’Nolan’s novels to encompass his journalism for the *Irish Times* (and a range of other magazines and newspapers), his theatrical work and his untranslated writing in Irish. The thesis uses a methodology based on original research into periodicals and newspapers. The theoretical argument of the thesis can be summarized in three related claims. Firstly, that many of the texts associated most closely with O’Nolan can be seen as the product of collaboration between a network of writers who embody a particular literary impulse and moment in the history of Irish society. Secondly, that we can compare this impulse to the wave of experimentation associated with the European avant-garde, defined broadly enough to include its fellow-travellers in European modernism and its diverse nineteenth-century predecessors. Their shared use of montage is a particular focus for this comparison. Thirdly, that like the European avant-garde, the work of the O’Nolan circle is characterized by a politicized orientation towards popular culture, scepticism towards claims to artistic autonomy and an insistence on the writer or artist as a subject of the historical process. As such, the work of the O’Nolan circle emerges as an illuminating example of Irish cultural production between 1934 and 1945.

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List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout.

Primary sources

<i>AW</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>At War</i> , ed. by John Wyse Jackson (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999).
<i>BB</i>	Myles na gCopaleen, <i>An Béal Bocht nó An Milleánach: Drochscéal ar an drochshaol curtha in eagar le Myles na gCopaleen</i> (Cork: Mercier, 1986).
<i>CL</i>	Myles na gCopaleen/Gopaleen, ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’, the <i>Irish Times</i> .
<i>CN</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>The Complete Novels: At Swim-Two-Birds, The Third Policeman, The Poor Mouth, The Hard Life, The Dalkey Archive</i> , introd. by Keith Donohue (London: Everyman, 2007).
<i>MBM</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>Myles before Myles: A selection of the earlier writings of Brian O’Nolan</i> , ed. by John Wyse Jackson, (Dublin: Lilliput Press 2012, first published by Granada, 1985).
<i>L</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien</i> , ed. by Maebh Long (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2017).
<i>PT</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>Plays and Teleplays</i> , ed. by Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).
<i>SF</i>	Flann O’Brien, <i>The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien</i> , ed. by Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. by Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).
<i>BC</i>	Flann O’Brien Papers, MS. 1997.027, 1880–1995, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, by box and folder.
<i>NLI</i>	National Library of Ireland, by MS, box and folder.

Secondary research

- Brooker Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005).
- Clissmann Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975).
- Costello Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp, *Flann O'Brien: An Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987).
- Cronin *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm International, 1998, first published by London: Grafton, 1989).
- Donohue Keith Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist: A Study of Flann O'Brien* (Dublin: Maunsel & Company, 2002).
- Hopper Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A portrait of the artist as a young post-modernist*, 2nd edn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009).
- Long Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- Ó Conaire Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1986).
- Taaffe Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish cultural debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008).

INTRODUCTION

An ‘unidentified subspecies’

In his review of Brian O’Nolan’s posthumously published *Stories and Plays* (1976), Niall Montgomery includes this striking statement: ‘O’Nolan was not a literary man. Part of his strength as a journalist lay in his hatred of all art and literature’.¹ Perhaps to say that O’Nolan hated all ‘art and literature’ is an exaggeration. Yet it’s clear that he displays no reverence for much of the art or literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. O’Nolan’s literary tastes in later life are hinted at in a set of short reader reports he sends into Dublin’s Hodges Figgis bookshop in 1960. In these reports O’Nolan harshly criticizes one novel, entitled *The Crying Land*, as having a ‘repellent dwelling on domesticity’, for its ‘unreal’ characters and for being ‘of the novellete type without any of the skill of pulp fiction’, then attacks another work, entitled *Let No Man Dare*, for its ‘torturous plot concern[ing] IRA doings vis-à-vis World War II, an abundance of naïve situations and fantastic stage-Irish dialogue’ (*L*, p. 261). In fact, the only books O’Nolan praises are a playfully anecdotal treatise on angling and a children’s book entitled *The Ginger Cat’s Palace* (*L*, p. 261). Consistent with his earlier satirical campaigns against naturalists such as Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O’Connor in the 1930s and 1940s, the mature O’Nolan seems to detest the inauthenticity of realist novels on serious topics and to prefer lowbrow genres or, as he puts it, ‘the skill of pulp fiction’. We detect in O’Nolan’s condemnation of characters as ‘unreal’, of plots as ‘torturous’ and of situations as ‘naïve’, echoes of the narrator’s condemnation of the novel in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), for ‘frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters’ (*CN*, p. 21). Although the possibility of outwitting readers in a way which is not ‘shabby’ is perhaps left open, these are examples of how O’Nolan gleefully undermines the autonomy of art.

Other intellectuals of his time take a different view. For example, in 1941 the Irish Cubist painter Mainie Jellett, who occupies a position between Irish painting’s

¹ Niall Montgomery, review of Flann O’Brien, *Stories and Plays*, ed. by Claud Cockburn, *New Republic*, (13 March 1976), 32–34, repr. in Christine O’Neil, *Niall Montgomery Dublinman* (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), pp. 191–93 (p. 192).

establishment and its modernist avant-garde, puts forward her aesthetic programme in *Commentary*, a magazine associated with Dublin's modern art, literature and theatre scene. Jellett praises art that holds a 'spiritual power quite apart from the religious aspect of this quality'. To such artworks, which stir us into a state of profound contemplation, she opposes the false and dangerous alternative of 'materialistic' art:

All who are interested in the artistic experience should realise that any artistic effort, no matter how small, is a creative act, it is not a desire to copy – the only true way the artist can copy nature is by creating on a lesser plane, but with the same order and principles as natural creations. There are pictures, music, literature, and all great forms of art which have stood the test of time and possess the spiritual creative force; there is also art, so-called, particularly now when standards are low, which does not wish to attempt to touch the qualities which produce this force – the qualities used are the materialistic, which appeal to the lower senses and fail to produce that contemplative state which true works of art produce. There are ignorant people who mistake this so-called art for the real thing. It requires no effort to take it in, it can create superficial pleasure for the moment; with the stage, cinema, or music it produces a soporific state which drowns any critical faculty, and which many think is all that is expected of art. At the present time, when more and more are becoming mechanised in thought and way of life, this type of art is more than popular.²

If we apply Jellett's definition of art to O'Nolan's career, we see that, despite *At Swim's* scepticism, he did in fact produce artwork of the order that she describes. As Anne Clissmann observes, his novels *The Third Policeman* (written 1940, published 1967) and *An Béal Bocht* (1941) represent 'alternative worlds which were logically consistent within the terms of their own imaginative construction'.³ As O'Nolan told theatre producer Hugh Leonard, who was working on an adaptation of *The Dalkey Archive* in November 1964, '[you] must remember that the most crackpot invention must be subject to its own stern logic' (L, p. 437). There's no doubt that these

² Mainie Jellett, 'Art as a spiritual force', *Commentary* 1.1 (November 1941), 10, 12 (p. 10).

³ Clissmann, p. 334.

novels, now widely read and studied, have ‘stood the test of time’ as literary art, according to Jellett’s terms.

However, on closer inspection, we find that these novels are imbued with a remarkably voracious intertextual energy. Not only do they create ‘alternative worlds’, they do so by stitching cultural material which is cut from a vast array of texts and contexts into the constitutive fabric of those worlds. O’Nolan’s texts turn out to be original principally in the sense that they are radically non-original: every stylistic turn and image is pillaged from somewhere else. Furthermore, in O’Nolan’s work the impulse towards such literary sophistication jostles with an anarchic celebration of the kind of art that Jellett attacks: writing and film which is popular and derivative, designed to provoke superficial pleasure and grounded in the blank irony of mass culture. The four million words of *Cruiskeen Lawn* consecrate the middlebrow literary world of Dublin’s professional classes in a sprawling corpus which John Wyse Jackson describes as ‘some unidentified subspecies of the fiction family’ (*AW*, p. 11). They are filled with everything that Jellett dismisses as ‘materialistic’. In *At Swim*, the two impulses collide: popular Westerns, sordid crime stories and medieval poetry are hurled together in a plot which celebrates the petit-bourgeois peccadillos of Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan, and their love for the working man’s poetry of Jem Casey. In Jellett’s category of the ‘materialistic’ we can also place the large body of comedy O’Nolan writes for the stage, radio and screen. Towards the end of his life O’Nolan seems to straightforwardly regard himself as a popular writer. In April 1965 he pitches the idea of a ‘fresh book on the origin and development up to the economic, literary, artistic and political status of the Irish people today’ to an American publisher with the title of *Glorious Ireland Then And Now* or GINAT, ‘which’, he writes, ‘is attractive by being subtly and deliberately ambiguous’, and requests a \$5,000 advance (*L*, pp. 488–89).

This tension, between sophistication and popularity, between highbrow poetics and middlebrow belly-laugh, has a bearing on all of the major debates within O’Nolan criticism as it has developed over the past fifty years. These debates include: whether to historically situate him as a late-modernist or theoretically read him as a post-modernist writer; whether to read him in primarily Irish or international terms; the related question of whether it is possible to integrate the differing senses of O’Nolan as an Irish-language and an English-language writer; and the most recent turn towards the treatment of the body, animals, objects and popular culture in his

work.⁴ O’Nolan’s attack on art and literature, including on works of canonical modernism, set against his now undisputed status as a pre-eminent Irish modernist, is perhaps the central fracture that makes the meaning of his work so continually interesting and elusive in all of these dimensions. If O’Nolan the man hated all art and literature, what does the ambiguity of his creative project propose in its place?

The identity crisis of Brian O’Nolan – the modernist who disavowed modernism – helps us to think about the identity crisis of modernist research overall. Since the arrival of the New Modernist studies the discipline has expanded its field of enquiry from the narrow canon of poems and novels defined by American critics in the 1940s and 1950s to a vast range of texts. Modernism now includes marginalized, colonial and postcolonial voices, middlebrow novels and commercial magazines, film and radio, along with work from the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, impinging on and perhaps absorbing texts once categorized as postmodernist within an expanded modernism. As Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers observe, it may be more proper to state that modernist research is now the study of ‘a massive attempt to make sense of a restless, voracious and ever-expanding modernity’, rather than a canonical group of writers.⁵

Latham and Rogers also note that the precursor to this expansion is found in theoretical work on the European avant-garde groupings of Futurism, Dada and Surrealism by two European Marxist theoreticians, Renato Poggioli in the 1960s, and Peter Bürger in the 1970s. In particular, Bürger’s work ‘remains important [...] because it attempts to untangle the idea of modernism from the cables of tradition, education, and institutionalization that had cut it off from its social life and context’.⁶

⁴ Referring mainly to the works cited in the ‘List of abbreviations’ these debates can be summarized as follows: Keith Hopper makes the case for O’Nolan as a key example of nascent post-modernism, whereas Joseph Brooker is inclined to view him as a late-modernist; Mae bh Long and Hopper offer a range of internationally-oriented theoretical readings, as do numerous other recent essays and monographs, such as Flore Colouma’s *Diglossia and the Linguistic Turn: Flann O’Brien’s Philosophy of Language* (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), whereas Carol Taaffe emphasizes the importance of Irish cultural production for understanding O’Nolan’s work, and Breandán Ó Conaire documents the innumerable Irish-language sources for his work; last year Louis de Paor made a related case for O’Nolan as ‘More Irish than Irish’ in a closing keynote given at ‘Palimpsests: Fifth International Flann O’Brien Conference’ (University College Dublin, 16–19 July 2019), where the most recent themes of the body, animals, objects and popular culture emerged across a range of papers and panels.

⁵ Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 207.

⁶ Latham and Rogers, p. 130.

To put it another way, the pressure of accounting for the politics and social agenda of the historical avant-garde has helped critics to prise open the New Critical hermeneutic paradigm and expose modernism once again to the richness of the social actuality of modernity, from which it arose and in which it intervenes. The challenge posed by the avant-garde as, in Frederick Karl and Astradur Eysteinsson's words, the 'cutting edge of modernism', is what motivates this thesis to make use of avant-garde parallels to participate in a similar reorientation of O'Nolan studies.⁷ To borrow terms from Umberto Eco, this thesis uses the European avant-garde as an 'instrument' to examine the 'object' of O'Nolan's work between 1934 and 1945.⁸ This periodization allows the thesis to focus close attention on Irish cultural production between one event, the launch of O'Nolan's comic magazine *Blather*, and another, the end of the Second World War, which brings to a close Ireland's 'Emergency' and as such ends a certain phase in Irish cultural life and world history.

The chapters in this thesis apply European contexts – ranging from Berlin Dada to *transition* and *Finnegans Wake*, from Franz Kafka to Heinrich Heine, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Karl Kraus to the writings of Frankfurt School theorists like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – to construct a reading of O'Nolan which complicates and expands our understanding of Irish modernism in a way that is complementary to the widening of the scope of modernism studies into something like the study of modernity itself. They argue for O'Nolan's writing as work which draws significantly on the resources and the energy of middlebrow and popular culture, and which relentlessly satirizes those who aspire to, or even value, the status of highbrow art and literature. They discover texts which deploy the related formal techniques of collage, which advertises its fragmentary nature, and montage, which synthesizes fragments more subtly, to encode a nuanced yet urgent cultural critique, both nationalist and anti-nationalist, both conservative and revolutionary, and infused throughout with an anti-fascist politics and poetics.

⁷ Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 178, citing Frederick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885–1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), p. 13.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *How to write a thesis*, trans. by Caterina Mongiat Farina (Harvard: MIT Press, 2015), p. 45.

The O’Nolan circle

Since the rise of New Modernist studies, modernist scholarship is shifting its focus away from the study of the canonical figures surrounding the ‘men of 1914’ and towards an understanding of the networks of men and women, often melding commercial and artistic interests, which constitute the field of cultural production we read as modernism. In their introduction to the recent *A History of Irish Modernism*, Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby note that ‘[coteries] and associations are particularly rich contexts for studying innovation and experimentation across artistic media’.⁹ The turn from individuals to networks and social spaces in humanities scholarship aligns with contemporary research into genius and high performance, which now suggests that recognized achievements in any domain are attributable not to innate talent or genetics but rather to collaboration, cultural context and specific kinds of practice.¹⁰ Accordingly, this thesis presents a body of work which, as O’Nolan scholarship increasingly recognizes, is not the work of one man but a product of collaboration between a varied circle of men and women.¹¹

Specifically, the work of Brian O’Nolan (1911–1966) is entangled with that of his collaborators Niall Montgomery (1915–1987) and Niall Sheridan (1912–1998) to the extent that they are frequently referred to, collectively, as ‘the O’Nolan circle’, in the thesis. That association is made explicit in a biographical note for Montgomery published in the American journal, *Furioso*, in 1943, where he is described as ‘a member of a group of young, brilliant Irish writers which includes Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien) and Niall Sheridan’.¹² The O’Nolan circle in turn belongs to a

⁹ Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, ‘Introduction: Irish Modernism, from Emergence to Emergency’ in Castle and Bixby (eds), *A History of Irish Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–24 (p. 2).

¹⁰ See, for example, Jack Stillman, *Multiple authorship and the myth of solitary genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: How all of us can achieve extraordinary things* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

¹¹ Each chapter provides its own account of the extent to which the material discussed can be considered a collaboration, but key moments in the emerging consensus include Taaffe’s unearthing of an archival evidence that Niall Montgomery was writing about a third of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the late 1940s, from at least 1947 onwards (p. 127) and Long’s keynote address, ‘This is not about a bicycle’: Brian O’Nolan and Politics of Friendship’, delivered at the conference ‘Acting Out: Fourth International Flann O’Brien Conference’ (University of Salzburg, 17–21 July 2017).

¹² Various, ‘Contributors’ in *Furioso: A Magazine of Poetry*, 2.1 (1943), p. 56.

network of friends and collaborators which is identifiable from first-hand accounts and substantiated in connections that can be traced through letters and shared publication venues such as *Combthrom Féinne*, *Blather* and *transition*. Poetry is important to the network, which includes Brian Coffey (1905–1995), Denis Devlin (1908–1959), Charles Donnelly (1910–1937) and Donagh MacDonagh (1912–1968), all part of the University College Dublin circle. Coffey, Donnelly and Montgomery belong to a group described by Michael Smith in *The Lace Curtain* as ‘a whole generation of Irish poets, whose work [...] has been as completely ignored as if it didn’t exist’.¹³ *Poems from Ireland* (1944), edited by MacDonagh, includes work by him and Sheridan, along with three translations of medieval Irish poems published by O’Nolan as Myles na cGopaleen.¹⁴ MacDonagh and Sheridan also self-publish an edition of *Twenty Poems* in 1934.¹⁵ Notable individuals in the UCD group include the actors Cyril Cusack (1910–1993) and Liam Redmond (1913–1989), who married MacDonagh’s sister Barbara, along with Brian’s brother, Ciarán Ó Nualláin (1910–1983).¹⁶

Sheridan goes on to work in Irish radio and television (*L*, p. 4) and the wider network surrounding the O’Nolan circle involves professional and personal connections to notable figures in Irish theatre, art and letters including Hilton Edwards (1903–1982), Isa Hughes (1889–1964), Denis Johnston (1901–1984), A. J. Leventhal (1896–1979), Micheál Mac Liammóir (1899–1978), Ria Mooney (1903–1973), Seán Ó Faoláin (1900–1991), Blanaid and Cecil French Salkeld (1880–1959; 1903–1969), R. M. ‘Bertie’ Smyllie (1893–1954) and, through Montgomery’s and Sheridan’s contacts, extends to Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), James Joyce (1882–1941) and Thomas MacGreevy (1893–1967). There is also an important international connection in the late 1930s between Sheridan and O’Nolan and the American-Armenian playwright, William Saroyan (1908–1981).¹⁷ It’s a male-dominated circle,

¹³ Michael Smith, ‘Editorial’, *The Lace Curtain*, 4 (Summer 1971), 3–4 (p. 3). This issue republishes the three Myles na cGopaleen translations featured in *Poems from Ireland* on pp. 46–48.

¹⁴ Donagh MacDonagh (ed.), *Poems from Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Times, 1944, repr. 1945), pp. vii–xi.

¹⁵ Donagh MacDonagh and Niall Sheridan, *Twenty Poems* (Dublin: Privately printed, 1934).

¹⁶ The evidence from letters and publication projects which is cited in this thesis essentially supports the list of ‘contemporaries and friends’ given by Niall Sheridan in his ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ essay in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien / Myles na cGopaleen)*, ed. by Timothy O’Keeffe (London: Martin Brian and O’Keeffe, 1973), pp. 32–53 (pp. 34–45). Ciarán’s role in *Blather* is discussed in chapter one.

¹⁷ Saroyan’s relationship with O’Nolan is briefly discussed in chapter five, section two.

but a group of women also become an important part of O’Nolan’s network: his wife and executor Evelyn (1909–1995), his friend Dorine Davin (1914–1963) as discussed by Long (*L*, p. xiv), Patricia Murphy (née Avis), novelist and editor of a periodical, *Nonplus* (1959–1960), which republished extracts from *Cruiskeen Lawn*,¹⁸ and Elisabeth Schnack (1899–1992), Swiss writer and translator of his short story, ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ (*L*, p. 418).

This thesis proposes that often the nature of O’Nolan’s work is collaborative in that it is at least partially explained by the mindset and motivations of the groups to which he belonged. Collaboration, in this sense, goes beyond the practical work of co-writing or editing and extends into the shared social context and horizon of expectations, including commercial considerations or limitations, which inform a given writer’s choices. To explain this kind of shared context, Raymond Williams offers a theory of cultural ‘formations’ which distinguishes between groups based on formal membership, those based on what he calls a ‘collective public manifestation’ such a press, periodical or manifesto, and finally those which have neither of the above characteristics but are nevertheless linked by a ‘conscious association or group identification’.¹⁹ Using the Bloomsbury group of figures including Clive and Vanessa Bell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster and John Maynard Keynes as an example of the last category, Williams explains the characteristics of formations using the concept of a class fraction: a group which arises from a certain class but may have distinct interests which ‘are not characteristic of the class as a whole’.²⁰ He describes the class fraction to which Bloomsbury belongs as

a fraction of the ruling class in the sense both that they belong integrally to it, directly serving the dominant social order, and that they are a coherent division of it, defined by the values of a special higher education: the possession of a general, rather than a merely national and class-bound, culture; and the practice of specific intellectual and professional skills.²¹

¹⁸ See Tobias Harris, “‘CHRONITIS’: Myles na gCopaleen à la recherche du temps perdu’, *Modernist Review*, 12 December 2016, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20170626160919/http://themodernistreview.co.uk/>> [archived by the Wayback Machine 26 June 2017] and Cronin, p. 218.

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981), p. 68.

²⁰ Williams, p. 74.

²¹ Williams, p. 80.

Within this fraction, the Bloomsbury group is ‘genuinely dissident’, expressing the values of its class fraction in a ‘more absolute form’ by insisting on ‘wholly open intellectual inquiry, and on a related entire tolerance’ and finding itself ‘in opposition to what it regarded as the stupidity, incompetence and prejudice of the actual holders of political and economic power’.²² This characterization provides a reference point for understanding the O’Nolan circle, who belong to a fraction of the rising, mostly Catholic, middle class who gain much in material and cultural terms from their parents’ participation in the fight for Irish independence on its political, military and cultural fronts. Roy Foster documents the revolutionary wing of this generation in his book, *Vivid Faces*: those who rebelled against the Home Rule politics of their own parents in favour of separatism. Foster refers to a concept of generations, rather than classes, to describe ‘carriers of intellectual and organizational alternatives to the status quo, acting under the constellation of factors prevalent at the time of their birth’.²³

O’Nolan’s father Micheál (1875–1937) was a civil service official, an Irish-language activist, an ‘avid reader’ and ‘excellent storyteller’.²⁴ Of O’Nolan’s paternal uncles, Gearóid was a priest, writer and professor of Irish, Fergus was a post-Independence civil servant, playwright and writer, and Peter was a member of a holy order and a scholar of Greek and Latin.²⁵ Montgomery’s father James (1870–1943) was ‘a close friend of Arthur Griffith’s’ whose ‘education vastly exceeded his formal schooling’ and whose ‘winsome and able personality’ brought him close to figures including W. B. Yeats, Jack Yeats, J. M. Synge, George Russell, James Stephens and Oliver St. John Gogarty; after the establishment of the Free State he rose from working at the Dublin Gas Company to become Ireland’s first Film Censor.²⁶ Donagh MacDonagh was the son of Thomas MacDonagh (1878–1916), a teacher, poet and nationalist who acted as a commander in the Easter Rising, signed the 1916

²² Williams, p. 80.

²³ Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 6–7.

²⁴ Breandán Ó Conaire, ‘Brian Ó Nualláin/O’Nolan: Scholarly Background and Foreground’, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 4–16 (pp. 5–6).

²⁵ Ó Conaire, ‘Brian Ó Nualláin/O’Nolan: Scholarly Background and Foreground’, p. 5.

²⁶ Christine O’Neill, ‘Portrait of a Dublinman’ in O’Neill, *Niall Montgomery Dublinman: Selected Writings*, (Dublin: Ashfield, 2015), pp. 15–27 (pp. 21–22).

proclamation and was executed by the British.²⁷ Brian Coffey's father was Denis Coffey, a professor of anatomy and the first president of UCD between 1908–1940.

The social background of the O'Nolan circle helps to explain this group's rebellious engagement with both Irish cultural nationalism and international modernism as discussed in this thesis. Religion plays a role. Those, like O'Nolan, from Catholic backgrounds must be aware that some of the most fervent cultural nationalists who take up positions of political power in the Free State, such as Aodh de Blácam or Ernst Blythe, hail from Ulster Protestant family backgrounds. O'Nolan's subversive performances as 'Flann O'Brien' and 'Myles na gCopaleen', which reject official images of Gaelic Ireland and offer instead a pluralistic version of Irish identity, can be read productively as the expression of this specific cultural formation. Although occupying professional positions close to the centre of political and cultural power in Ireland, his circle's attitude to the governing administration remains 'dissident' and alert to the ironies and injustices of the Irish state formation process. As such, this thesis aims, through its study of O'Nolan's work, to redress a wider under-theorization of Irish cultural processes between the 1920s and 1940s.²⁸

Defining the 'avant-garde'

Since this thesis uses the 'European avant-garde' as its instrument to analyze O'Nolan's work, it is first necessary to survey the history of critical definitions of the 'avant-garde' in relation to modernism and indicate where they resonate with the analysis to follow. The term 'avant-garde', as a widely-used adjective and a critically debated noun, is almost as mobile and diverse in its meanings as 'modernism' itself. Its origins are in military and political language: the force that leads, that marches ahead of the rest and that is in most danger of sacrificing itself.²⁹ Though the senses of an artistic avant-garde and the military or political avant-garde have never truly detached, there is a distinctive if expansive meaning of the term 'avant-garde' for

²⁷ 'Thomas MacDonagh', Ricorso <http://www.ricorso.net/rx/az-data/authors/Mac/M-Donagh_T/life.htm> [accessed 12 January 2020]. MacDonagh's story plays a prominent part in Foster's *Vivid Faces*, summarized in the index entry, pp. 451–52.

²⁸ Another example of work which addresses this period is Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), which the thesis draws upon.

²⁹ 'avant-garde | avant-guard, n.'. *OED Online*. December 2019. Oxford University Press. <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13610?redirectedFrom=avant-garde#eid>> [accessed 16 February 2020].

Irish cultural commentators in the period this thesis examines. The adjective ‘avant-garde’ is used to describe literature which breaks with literary realism or naturalism and painting which breaks with the academic style of representationalist painting; work which we would now describe in a broad sense as modernism. In literature: Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein.³⁰ In painting: Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and, as explored in chapter six, the Dublin-based painters of the Emergency such as the Subjectivist White Stag group and Irish modernist painters such as Mainie Jellett, Louis le Brocqy and Norah McGuinness.³¹ In 1939, the American Marxist critic Clement Greenberg outlines a salient contemporary view of the meaning of the ‘avant-garde’ when he describes it as the last preserve of a cultured elite within the decayed social superstructure of late capitalism. At times, he sounds similar to Jellett when assigning the avant-garde the task of defending the values of individual creativity and artistic autonomy through the elevation of form over content:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.³²

The notion that ‘[content] is to be dissolved [...] completely into form’ also echoes Samuel Beckett’s remarks that ‘[here] form is content, content is form’ in his 1929 discussion of *Work in Progress*, ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce’.³³ When O’Nolan intervenes in debates about the meaning of the avant-garde or satirically addresses it in some way, he may be working with this kind of definition. Like Jellett’s framing of art more generally, Greenberg’s understanding of the avant-garde also relies on an

³⁰ Chapters two and four evidence this understanding of the literary avant-garde.

³¹ Chapter six analyzes how this group were described as an ‘avant-garde’ in the *Irish Times*.

³² Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O’Brian, 4 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), I, pp. 5–22 (p. 6).

³³ Samuel Beckett, Eugene Jolas, et al., *Finnegans Wake: A Symposium - Exagmination Round His Incamination of Work in Progress* (Paris: Shakespeare & Co, 1929, repr. New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 13.

opposition between the avant-garde and the thought, habits and aesthetics of everyday mass culture. He contrasts his definition of the avant-garde with

that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.³⁴

Kitsch is the mass culture which has replaced the traditional peasant culture of the countryside as a result of industrialization and mass literacy. It is 'ersatz culture [...] destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide'. One of the preconditions for kitsch is a fully 'matured' traditional high culture from which it can pillage, and the resources of the avant-garde itself, whose effects kitsch imitates, but this time for a mass audience. As Greenberg puts it, '[kitsch], using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility'.³⁵ However, Greenberg's essay doesn't simply divide the avant-garde and kitsch into opposed categories separated by a 'vast interval'. He also establishes that they are inter-related, dependent on each other and blended in an infinite array of middlebrow cultural commodities, such as, for example, the *New Yorker*, which as 'fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses'.³⁶

The foundations for late twentieth-century theories of the avant-garde are laid by Renato Poggioli in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962, English 1968). Poggioli locates the emergence of the artistic avant-garde in late nineteenth-century Decadent and Symbolist movements, with its 'most remote temporal limits being the various preludes to the romantic experience'.³⁷ He traces the development of the avant-garde through its print culture, noting from a review of periodical titles that, in its hands, the journal evolved from an 'organ of opinion' in the nineteenth century to an

³⁴ Greenberg, p. 9.

³⁵ Greenberg, pp. 9-15.

³⁶ Greenberg, p. 11.

³⁷ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (London & Harvard: Belknap Press, 1968), p. 15

‘independent and isolated military unit, completely and sharply detached from the public, quick to act, not only to explore but also to battle, conquer and adventure on its own’ (with the Schlegel brothers’ *Athenaeum* journal as its predecessor).³⁸ Poggioli proposes that the avant-garde is characterized by movements – organized groups intent on changing things – as opposed to the philosophical and aesthetic schools which have existed as pedagogical institutions since antiquity. He characterizes different movements of the avant-garde according to their position within a dialectic of four ‘moments’: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism, in addition to some other categories.³⁹ Rooting his analysis quite firmly in the domain of art, poetry and high culture rather than that of the popular, Poggioli organizes his book around a series of investigations into the following areas: the avant-garde cult of childishness and nonsense through which he links Dadaism to nonsense writing in Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll; the central concept of transition, of either being at the end of a series or inaugurating a new series; the avant-garde’s close relationship with fashion and the intelligentsia; its left-wing revolutionary politics (Poggioli notes how favouring Fascism tends to crush avant-garde groups but sympathy for Communism ‘can favor it, or at least not hurt it’); the importance of the social condition of alienation and the avant-garde’s contradictory entanglement with what he calls mass-produced ‘pseudo-culture’; and finally what he sees as the central avant-garde preoccupation of experimentalism, which he associates strongly with Impressionism and develops into the concept of avant-garde institutions as proving grounds or laboratories, such as the magazine *transition* or New York’s New Directions press.⁴⁰

Poggioli places a virtually comprehensive list of avant-garde groups within this schema, from the Decadents and the movements around Impressionism to Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, to lesser-known groupings like *transition*’s Verticalism along with Ultraism, Yugoslav Zenithism, English poet Henry Treece’s ‘The Apocalypse’ grouping, Suprematism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), finally turning to the flickering penumbra of group names that ‘rose and fell within an instant’, giving the example of Régis’s Machaud’s list of French movements including *Unanismo*, *Paroxysme*, *Synthétisme*, *Intégralisme*, *Impulsionisme*,

³⁸ Poggioli, p. 15.

³⁹ Poggioli, pp. 23–29

⁴⁰ Poggioli, pp. 36, 76–77, 100, 106, 78–102, 132–136.

Sincérisme, Intensisme, Simultanéisme, and Dynamisme.⁴¹ Poggioli also notes the challenge posed to his exploration of the avant-garde as a rebellious, transitional and experimentalist impulse by the neo-classicism of T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme (figures of the ‘rear-guard’ or ‘anti-avant-garde’ associated with literary high modernism which are discussed shortly). In reply, Poggioli chooses to elevate the ‘victory in the spirit of avant-gardism’ over modernism itself with the following formulation:

the appearance of a series of new poetics, neoclassical on the surface, has devaluated experiment as an end in itself. But all this indicates fundamentally that an ingenuous and exacerbated modernism is giving way before a more profound and truer sense of our own modernity.⁴²

As Latham and Rogers note, Poggioli’s wide-ranging analysis of an avant-garde that ‘thrived in a variety of contexts’ suggests that avant-garde art is ‘attentive to its own historical specificity and did not aspire to universality or Eliotic immortality’.⁴³ As such, Poggioli marshals this array of avant-gardist groups along the lines of shared characteristics which position them against and inside the forces of industrial modernity.

Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974, English 1984) proposes a sharper division and a more distinctive role for the avant-garde, based (as Latham and Rogers also observe), not on the content of specific movements or groups but on an analysis of the avant-garde’s ‘social function’.⁴⁴ This function, put simply, is an assault on what Bürger describes as the institution of art in bourgeois society. Two years before Greenberg’s article appears, Herbert Marcuse publishes ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’ (1937) which argues that the function of ‘affirmative culture’ is to stabilize the social structure by drawing protests against authority into its own contemplative, hermetic space and thus sealing off dissent from society as a whole.⁴⁵ Drawing on Marcuse (who in turn draws on Marx’s

⁴¹ Poggioli, p. 144.

⁴² Poggioli, p. 223.

⁴³ Latham and Rogers, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Latham and Rogers, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Herbert Marcuse, ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’ in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Mayfly, 2009), pp. 65–98.

analysis of false consciousness and religion), Bürger theorizes the social function of art as an institution: neutralizing art's critique of bourgeois society by containing artworks within a private means of production (as unified works like novels or paintings) and consumption (by individuals reading or contemplating pictures alone). Bürger reads avant-garde interventions such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and John Heartfield's photomontages as important (although, ultimately, failed) attempts to negate these individual practices of production and reception, compromise the organic integrity of bourgeois art and re-integrate a form of politicized art into the 'life praxis'.⁴⁶ This is a more exclusionary definition of the avant-garde as a movement distinct from the individual modernist practices of writers like Joyce, Eliot and Woolf, which despite its own subsequent assimilation into the institution of art, represents an attempt to bridge the separation between high and mass culture: a utopian moment grounded in the historicity of the early twentieth century's revolutionary upsurge. As we shall see in this thesis, O'Nolan's work demonstrates some consciousness that the specific movements Bürger uses as examples, Dadaism and Surrealism, are radically more subversive than the wider contemporary definition of the avant-garde as modernist, non-representational art. This thesis argues that aspects of O'Nolan's project can also be shown to adhere to Bürger's characterization of the historical avant-garde: his work often displays a hostility to the bourgeois novel or painting which is produced by the individual artist for individual consumption, and favours more collectivist modes of production and reception such as journalism or the stage. What O'Nolan deems to be 'bad' art, whether that is represented by Seán Ó Faoláin's naturalist fiction or Jellett's modernist paintings, is anatomized as a cultural object and satirically made culpable for social evils, inverting the more normal tendency to blame those evils on popular culture and the culture industry. Chapters three and six explore how this line of attack can be aligned with Bürger's theory.

However, Bürger's schema of categorization has been challenged. In a preface to the English translation, Jochen Schulte-Sasse compares his art versus life dichotomy unfavourably to the more integrated thinking of Walter Benjamin on Surrealism, consciousness and mass experience.⁴⁷ As Latham and Rogers note,

⁴⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 12–14, 49.

⁴⁷ 'Foreword' to Bürger, p. xl – xlviii.

Bürger's thesis earns him 'hostile responses, especially from Anglo-American scholars'. These opponents, 'ranging from Ann Ardis to Raymond Williams, criticized Bürger's stark distinctions and have proposed more fluid, overlapping conceptions of modernist and avant-garde arts'.⁴⁸ Eysteinsson's *The Concept of Modernism* represents one such critique. He concurs with the key tenet of Bürger's characterization of avant-garde art as a 'nonorganic' practice which uses fragmentation and collage techniques to resist the classical notion of aesthetically autonomous and holistic (or organic) artwork, but rejects Bürger's characterization of canonical modernism in these terms. The orderliness of modernism is, he suggests, simply a construct of the New Criticism that does not reflect the true nature of modernism's intervention as 'a "negative" practice, or as a poetics of the nonorganic text'.⁴⁹ The sharp distinction that Bürger poses between Dadaism and Surrealism on one hand, and the rest of modernism on the other, dissolves when modernism is re-evaluated along these lines. Eysteinsson also rejects the argument at the heart of Bürger's theory. Avant-garde works like Duchamp's readymades cannot be an assault on the institution of art because they depend on 'our preclassification of aesthetic activity' to mount their attack, which Eysteinsson views in broader terms as an assault on the ideologies tied up in conventional language and bourgeois life.⁵⁰ A more valid 'dialectical opposition', Eysteinsson argues, would be between modernism and the dominant literary category of realism, rather than between the avant-garde and Bürger's hard-to-define institution of art.⁵¹

In Eysteinsson's theory, the concepts of the avant-garde and modernism are not opposed but held in a 'dynamic reciprocity': '[when] used in conjunction with modernism, "avant-garde" tends to signify the more radical, norm-breaking aspects of modernism'.⁵² Within this larger category, the avant-garde should not only be seen as an experimental cutting edge or a 'turning outward (or forward) with respect to modernism; it is no less important that it turn *inward*, teasing out the radical elements of modernism whenever it appears to be losing its edge' (emphasis in original).⁵³ On

⁴⁸ Latham and Rogers, p. 130.

⁴⁹ Eysteinsson, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Eysteinsson, pp. 172–73.

⁵¹ Eysteinsson, p. 182.

⁵² Eysteinsson, pp. 4, 177.

⁵³ Eysteinsson, p. 178.

the basis that the central characteristic of the avant-garde is its radically exaggerated deployment of disjunction and collage techniques that interrupt the ‘established semiotic contracts’ of bourgeois society in order to propose the prospect of ‘some other modernity to be created’, Eysteinsson sees no reason why Kafka’s novels, Pound’s *Cantos* or Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* should not be understood as avant-garde.⁵⁴ In Eysteinsson’s characterization of the avant-garde as a force ‘teasing out the radical elements of modernism whenever it appears to be losing its edge’, we also recognize something of O’Nolan’s position within modernism. As discussed in chapters three and four, his novels interrogate and renovate modernist formal techniques with a playful and deconstructive satire that has invited critics like Hopper to locate in O’Nolan a postmodern turn. Eysteinsson’s expanded definition of the avant-garde to include the ‘nonorganic’ work of Kafka and Joyce also correlates with what O’Nolan and his contemporaries must have perceived, when reading their work in *transition*, to be work that is identifiably ‘avant-garde’, thereby helping to justify Kafka and Joyce’s inclusion within the category of the ‘European avant-garde’ in this thesis.

The debate on the avant-garde and the institution of art takes an important twist with the contribution of Lawrence Rainey in *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), a foundational text of New Modernist studies. Rainey shows how avant-gardists and modernists like Marinetti, Joyce, Eliot, Pound and H.D. were formative participants in a marketplace that brings together wealthy patrons, literary dealers and specialist publishing houses to produce a financially tenable institutional home for modernism that generally comes at the expense of making modernist texts available to a wide audience (at least until they are republished in popular editions).⁵⁵ In Rainey, Bürger’s institution of art, in the case of literary modernism, takes on a more legible historical form than Bürger himself delineates. If we substitute Rainey’s institution for Bürger’s more wide-ranging concept, then O’Nolan begins to look like an example of Bürger’s avant-gardist because it is this type of institution – the world of the little magazine, the limited edition and the wealthy collector – that O’Nolan’s work often has in its sights. There is no better example of this satirical assault than his appeal for reader subscriptions to produce a limited edition so limited that ‘NO COPY WHATEVER WILL BE PRINTED [...] The edition will be so utterly limited that a thousand pounds will not buy even one copy’ (*CL*, 7 January 1942, p. 3).

⁵⁴ Eysteinsson, pp. 7, 151, 176, 209, 212.

⁵⁵ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

In the same year that Rainey publishes *Institutions of Modernism*, Richard Murphy returns to the debate started by Bürger about the status of the avant-garde in relation to modernism in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, a study of the Expressionist writers Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin and Kafka, which seeks both to expand Bürger's category of the avant-garde to include Expressionism and to revisit the evaluation of the historical avant-garde in relation to modernism.⁵⁶ On the question of the avant-garde and modernism, Murphy echoes Eysteinsson's argument:

the avant-garde is a much more ambiguous and heterogeneous phenomenon than Bürger – with his narrow focus on dada and surrealism – would sometimes have us believe. More typically the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge of the broader movement of modernism, from which it frequently appears to be trying with difficulty to free itself. Modernism and the avant-garde often seem to be locked into a dialectical relationship in which the avant-garde questions the blind spots and unreflected presuppositions of modernism, while modernism itself reacts to this critique, at least in its later stages, by attempting to take into account in its own poetics some of the spectacular failures and successes of the historical avant-garde.⁵⁷

Murphy is more comfortable with Bürger's core argument about the avant-garde attack on art as an institution. He restates Bürger's evaluation in more positive terms by emphasizing the type of category recognition that the avant-garde brings about with its experiments and satirical attacks:

For despite the fact that they did not manage to dismantle the cultural apparatus as a whole, the various forms of protest which they employed succeeded both in making the general categories of the work of art recognizable, and in revealing the extent to which these categories needed constantly to be underwritten by the institution of art.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁷ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 11.

However, Murphy criticizes Bürger for ‘his fundamental ambiguity with regard to the category of aesthetic autonomy’.⁵⁹ He finds the argument that the avant-garde movements strove for the reintegration of art with the life-praxis unconvincing, because it seems to deny the avant-garde a vantage point from which to critique society and bring about change: ‘surely the possibility of reconceptualizing social practice is itself predicated upon the privilege of attaining a certain independence from the real (rather than being merged with it) and upon a sense of *critical distance* from the object to be criticized’ (original emphasis).⁶⁰ Murphy, in a version of Eysteinsson’s argument that the avant-garde required a ‘preclassification of aesthetic activity’ to mount their critique, no matter how violent, notes that ‘the possibility for criticism and social change appears to be predicated upon precisely that aesthetic autonomy which the avant-garde according to Bürger is supposed to overcome’.⁶¹ His solution is to turn to the theory of Richard Wolin, who suggests that avant-garde works occupy a middle ground which can be described as a position of ‘de-aestheticized autonomy’; this art divests itself of ‘the beautiful illusion, the aura of reconciliation, projected by art for art’s sake, while at the same time refusing to overstep the boundaries of aesthetic autonomy, beyond which art degenerates to the status of merely a “thing among things”’.⁶² Murphy and Wolin’s compromise shall be a useful term to categorize the intermediary position of O’Nolan’s work, which is poised between the elevated precincts of what Marcuse reads as ‘affirmative culture’ and the mundanity of everyday life. Murphy’s analysis of the Expressionist avant-garde fits well with O’Nolan, such as the suggestion that ‘the avant-garde text stages subjectivity as fragmented and discontinuous, for example as a constellation of personae, a series of mutually conflicting and contradictory roles played out by seemingly separate figures in the texts’, which readily applies to *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and Murphy’s analysis of Kafka will also be referred to in chapter four.⁶³

Most recently, Bürger’s model of the avant-garde and modernism has been met with another challenge in Emmett Stinson’s *Satirizing Modernism* (2017). Stinson

⁵⁹ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 27.

⁶⁰ Eysteinsson, p. 172; Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 27.

⁶¹ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 27.

⁶² Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 32, citing Richard Wolin, ‘Modernism vs. Postmodernism’, *Telos*, 62 (1984–85), 9–29 (p. 16).

⁶³ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 18.

rejects Bürger's categories and proposes a different way to describe artworks which subvert art's status and attack the figure of the modernist artist: the 'avant-garde satire of the avant-garde'.⁶⁴ Stinson defines various works, including *At Swim-Two-Birds*, as satires which use avant-garde formal techniques to satirize the avant-garde itself and, additionally, are stripped of the ethical or instrumental aims that characterize earlier forms of satire. Whether we prefer Bürger's or Stinson's definition of certain avant-garde practices, they both describe work that delegitimizes art's elevation from popular culture; work which is literate in the institutions and techniques of highbrow modernism yet straining against it. In this respect, the category which Bürger characterizes as the true historical avant-garde and which Emmett Stinson defines as an 'avant-garde satire of the avant-garde' are both apt descriptors for the project of Brian O'Nolan and his collaborators.⁶⁵

There is one more categorization to mention that might place O'Nolan's project differently, which is connected to but separate from Stinson's work. This is Martin Puchner's concept of Anglo-American modernism as a 'rear-guard'. Whereas Stinson examines Wyndham Lewis's novel, *The Apes of God* (1930) as an example of the 'avant-garde satire of the avant-garde', in *Bad Modernisms* Puchner claims Lewis as pre-eminent example of 'rear-guardism' (2006). According to Puchner, the rear-guard

seeks to correct and contain the avant-garde's excess without falling behind and losing touch with it entirely [...] Satire emerges as the rear-guard style par excellence, a way of using and co-opting avant-garde strategies without subscribing to their aesthetic and political implications.⁶⁶

The Anglo-American avant-garde schools of Imagism and Vorticism which Puchner describe as a 'rear-guard' resemble something like the aestheticist avant-garde as defined by Jellett and Greenberg. These are individuals and groups whom Rainey describes as an 'anti-avant-garde', aiming to benefit from the publicity surrounding

⁶⁴ Emmett Stinson, *Satirizing Modernism: Aesthetic Autonomy, Romanticism and the Avant-Garde* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 14.

⁶⁵ Stinson, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Martin Puchner, "The Aftershocks of *Blast*: Manifestos, Satire, and the Rear-Guard of Modernism" in Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds), *Bad Modernisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 45, 51

their association with the radical European avant-gardes whilst in fact retaining certain literary traditions.⁶⁷ Rejecting Romanticism, Eliot and Hulme instead adhere to a reclaimed neo-classicism, particularly by celebrating the impersonality and concentration of seventeenth and eighteenth century metaphysical poetry, and defending the principles of ‘direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective’ and a writerly sense of economy with words.⁶⁸

These definitions of an ‘anti-avant-garde’ or ‘rear-guard’ bear on this thesis in two ways. Firstly, satire and its defence of conservative principles is also central to O’Nolan’s engagement with the avant-garde, modernism and popular culture. So, in claiming a status for O’Nolan’s work as avant-gardist in Bürger’s sense, the thesis must be attentive to the different but equally valid readings of O’Nolan’s work as an avant-garde satire of the avant-garde or even as a ‘rear-guard’ action that embraces some aspects of the avant-garde in order to reject others. Secondly, and relatedly, there is a central place for the literature of the ‘native Irish tradition’ in O’Nolan’s work as ‘the only source of inspiration he acknowledged without qualification’.⁶⁹ For example, it is noted by Louis de Paor and Adrian Naughton that in his MA thesis on medieval Irish nature poetry, O’Nolan creates a series of aesthetic terms in Irish which fuse an admiration for the ‘Celtic realism’ of Old and Middle Irish literary craftsmanship with specifically Imagist and Vorticist principles of directness of representation, concentration and impersonality.⁷⁰ When reading O’Nolan through the lens of the avant-garde, as an assault on the institution of art or as the cutting edge of modernism, we cannot dismiss the elements of a positive aesthetic programme and the respect for Irish literary traditions which emerge from his work.

It is also necessary to briefly address the formal terminology of ‘collage’ and ‘montage’ as the key formal terms used in this thesis. Often they can be used interchangeably to mean something similar: work which includes inserted fragments in such a way that its artificiality or, as Bürger, Eysteinsson and Murphy would put it,

⁶⁷ Rainey, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Frank Stewart Flint, ‘Imagisme’, *Poetry* (March 1913), 198–200 (p. 199); Rainey, p. 30.

⁶⁹ J. C. C. Mays, ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination’ in *Myles*, pp. 77–119 (p 84), cited in Louis de Paor, “a scholar manqué?”: further notes on Brian Ó Nualláin’s engagement with Early Irish Literature’ in Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, John McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), pp. 189–203.

⁷⁰ De Paor, ‘a scholar manqué’, p. 197; Adrian Naughton, ‘Nádúir-Philíocht na Gaedhilge and Flann O’Brien’s Fiction’, in *Is It About a Bicycle?*, pp. 83–97.

‘nonorganic’ status, is emphasized.⁷¹ However, although the terms are interchangeable in most respects, there is a distinction between collage, as in Picasso’s paintings with scraps of sheet music or newspaper pasted onto a painted surface, and certain forms of the montage technique as developed for cinema and imitated in Expressionist and Dadaist visual and literary works. A collage effect in a given work is more likely to emphasize its discontinuities: we know that the scrap of newspaper or button has been added; we know, in *At Swim*, that we are moving from one fragment to another. Cinematic montage may produce the same disjunctive effects, but, as Walter Benjamin observes, it is also a more advanced technical procedure than collage, in which fragments can be seamlessly stitched together and the ‘apparatus’ behind the stitching is hidden.⁷² As such, advertising discontinuity is just one option available to the montage maker, whether in photo, film or literature; alternatively, the difference between various fragments can be concealed and they can be presented as a whole, thereby ‘outwitting’ the audience, whether in a ‘shabby’ fashion or otherwise (CN, p. 21). This thesis frequently discovers this latter type of montage operation underway in O’Nolan’s work, and chapter two borrows Joseph LaBine’s deployment of the term ‘interfusional’ to describe a similar process at work in O’Nolan’s blending of oral and written syntax across Irish and English.⁷³ Both collage and this specific sense of montage are central to O’Nolan’s literary project and they can be seen to operate at two distinct levels. At an overt level, his work is fragmentary, episodic and filled with *objets trouvés* in the disjunctive manner of collage. More covertly, his style resembles a cinematic montage which borrows from different sources and seamlessly synthesizes them in a way which invites us to imagine the worlds thus created as original and temporarily autonomous. It is often

⁷¹ Bürger, p. 91; Eysteinsson, p. 5; Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 13.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, ‘Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility [Third Version]’, *Selected Writings*, 5 vols, ed. by Michael Jennings; Howard Eiland; Gary Smith, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), IV, pp. 251–83 (p. 265–66).

⁷³ LaBine takes the concept from Thomas King’s term for the blending of oral and written literature in postcolonial cultures (Thomas King, ‘Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,’ *World Literature Written in English*, 30, 2 (1990), 10–16 (p. 12)) and develops it into a concept to describe the ‘clash’ and ‘false dialectic’ between English and Irish oral syntax which is ‘resolved by satire’ in his early short story ‘Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!’ and the early *Cruiskeen Lawn*, in his essay “‘the words I taught to him’: Interfusional Language Play and Brian Ó Nualláin’s ‘Revenge on the English’, *Parish Review*, 3, 2 (Spring 2016), 26–38 (p. 28).

the interplay between these two different types of montage aesthetic that generates the potent historical and cultural critique which the thesis argues is encoded in O’Nolan’s use of form. A more detailed account of the history of the montage form in relation to the avant-garde than has been necessary to provide here is given when it becomes so in chapter three, section three.

Methodology

The methodology of this thesis is culturally materialist, historicist and informed by the twenty-first century development of periodical studies.⁷⁴ In the application of texts and theoretical contexts provided by the European avant-garde to the object of the body of work associated with Brian O’Nolan, its argument proceeds by means of archival research into the magazines, periodicals and newspapers that surround and inform this work, such as *Razgle*, *Ireland To-day*, *transition*, the *Irish Times*, *Commentary* and *The Bell*. These contexts are frequently examples of Irish cultural production, but the thesis also draws upon the British and European writing and experiences to which O’Nolan and his collaborators had access. The periodical, in particular, is an immensely popular form in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. Figures available thanks to the tariff imposed on books, newspapers and magazines reveal that in 1939, there are 560,901 imported books, or 0.89 per household, 1,166,696 daily newspapers, or 22 per household, and 1,241,576 periodicals, or 24 per household. Although there are not comparable figures for the circulation of native Irish books and periodicals, these tallies suggest that newspapers, periodicals, journals and magazines form a central component of print culture in Ireland during the period this thesis examines.⁷⁵ As Jordana Mendelson observes, in the early and mid-twentieth century, advanced printing technology created a ‘networked world, well before our twenty-first century understanding of the term’.⁷⁶ For similar reasons to those noted by Nicholas Allen in his introduction to *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War*, which constructs its account of Irish modernism and state formation from ‘newspapers, diaries, photographs, letters,

⁷⁴ As summarized in Faye Hamill and Mark Hussey, *Modernism’s Print Cultures*, New Modernisms Series (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 121–50.

⁷⁵ Tony Farmar, *The History of Irish Book Publishing* (Stroud: The History Press, 2018), ebook version, paragraphs 17.56, 17.63.

⁷⁶ Jordana Mendelson, (ed.), ‘Introduction’ in *Magazines, Modernity and War* (Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2008), pp. 9–16 (p. 14).

sketchbooks, paintings and journals’, this thesis treats newspapers and magazines not just as a container for its object of study but as a rich site for historical and critical inquiry in their own right, continuously throwing up facts and perspectives which allow the reader to partially reconstruct the historical moment in which O’Nolan’s work participates.⁷⁷ The application of this method demonstrates throughout the thesis that, as Luke Gibbons writes, ‘[it] is [...] only by bringing history to bear on a work that its semantic richness, its capacity for proliferating meanings is realized’.⁷⁸ In terms of its account of O’Nolan’s work, the thesis also participates in the ongoing expansion of the locus of critical attention in O’Nolan studies as the field expands its reach outwards from an initial focus on his three early novels to encompass his journalism for the *Irish Times* (and a range of other magazines and newspapers), his theatrical work, his radio and teleplays and his untranslated writing in Irish.

Chapter summary

Chapter one examines the contexts for O’Nolan’s comic magazine, *Blather* (1934–35), initially situating it amidst middlebrow print culture with a focus on its main influence, *Razzele* (1932–41), revealing the features which are lifted directly from this model and exploring the significance of *Razzele*’s use of metaleptic humour for O’Nolan’s work more widely. The chapter introduces a key tenet of the overall argument by making a case for the importance of Dadaism as both parallel and intertext in O’Nolan’s journalism. The chapter places *Blather* in the context of the publications and activities of the Berlin Dadaists and specifically their magazine *Der Dada*, proposing three characteristics this periodical shares with *Blather*, namely: a technique the chapter describes as the ‘extended identity trope’; the subversion of popular culture with photomontage techniques; and an engagement with the creative possibilities of advertising. In conclusion, it’s proposed that these contexts shed light on the cohabitation of modernist experimentation and a popular orientation which characterizes *Blather* as an example of O’Nolan’s wider literary project.

Chapter two turns its attention to the O’Nolan circle’s interaction with Eugene Jolas’s little magazine *transition* (1927–1938) which was a venue for figures associated with Dadaism and Surrealism, published Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ in

⁷⁷ Nicholas Allen, *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4

⁷⁸ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 1996), p. 21.

English translation and, notably, printed the later excerpts of Joyce's *Work in Progress*, which would be published as *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. As in chapter one, this chapter uses European avant-garde print culture as a lens to examine Irish cultural production by analyzing a pastiche of *Work in Progress* that O'Nolan publishes in *Ireland To-day* in 1938. This text, written in an obscure neo-medieval Irish idiom, is both a response to Joyce's experimentation with language and character in *Work in Progress* and a body of writing which conducts a dialogue with medieval Irish literature, demonstrating the kind of synthetic or 'interfusional' method by which O'Nolan's work blends languages and sources in order to concoct nuanced forms of cultural and historical critique.

Chapter three moves from close reading to a more distanced approach by analyzing *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a response to the print culture of Ireland in the 1930s through the application of three inter-related contexts: the concept of pathology, the montage technique and the influence of Heinrich Heine. After setting up these contexts, the chapter examines cultural commentary on the Irish novel along with statistical information about the Irish reading market and uses *At Swim* to throw light on the pathological readings of the Irish novel which are published by figures like Aodh de Blacám, James Devane and Seán Ó Faoláin. The chapter argues that the construction of *At Swim* follows from the close attention it pays to the book as a commodity: both in terms of the wider book market and the commodity's conceptual framework. In conclusion, the chapter presents *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a response to the challenge of producing an Irish novel which is able to take into account the nuances of Ireland's historical and material circumstances.

Chapter four examines *The Third Policeman* in the context of the Irish reception of the novels of Kafka and what Murphy describes, claiming him for the avant-garde, as their 'most carefully delineated form of meaninglessness [...] which cries out to be interpreted'.⁷⁹ After first demonstrating the influence of Kafka on *The Third Policeman* with an account of Niall Sheridan's role in both the introduction of Kafka's translated novels to an Irish audience and in the genesis of the core ideas of *The Third Policeman*, the chapter proposes that the novel turns to Kafka's mode of modernism as an alternative to Joyce and the challenge posed by *Finnegans Wake*. Mirroring Kafka in its use of cycles of sleep and exhaustion and its treatment of

⁷⁹ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 26.

space, *The Third Policeman* also localizes Kafka's techniques, engaging allegorically with Irish history in order to stage a re-opening of its traumatic past to the imagination.

Chapter five is a substantial investigation into an aspect of O'Nolan's work which deserves greater critical scrutiny: the drama he co-creates for performances that take place between 1942 and 1943. After defending these plays from accusations of theatrical failure, the chapter argues for the importance of these texts as politically engaged and formally progressive, using methods that can be compared to the principles of Brechtian epic theatre, the plays of Karl Kraus and, in terms of direct influences, Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* and the work of the Čapek brothers. After excavating *Thirst's* critically significant variety stage context, the chapter addresses the politics of *Faustus Kelly* in the context of its major source, the *Faust* of Goethe, and argues that like *Faustus Kelly*, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* represents an anti-fascist engagement with Irish and European politics.

Chapter six examines O'Nolan's direct engagement with figures from the self-identifying Irish avant-garde in 1940s Dublin, including the organizers of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art and the White Stag group. The chapter finds that *Cruiskeen Lawn*, through satirical tactics that rely on drawing connections between Irish and European culture (echoing, perhaps, what Colin MacCabe reads in the *Wake* as the 'primer for a failed revolution' to ally Ireland with Europe 'rather than simply separating twenty-six counties from Britain'), espouses a cultural politics which seeks to reintegrate artwork with wider socio-historical contexts.⁸⁰ From its standpoint of 'de-aestheticized autonomy' the column mounts a critique of art's claims to autonomy from history using a technique of assembly, quotation and pastiche.⁸¹

The conclusion of the thesis moves slightly outside of the time period covered in order to present a pertinent reading of an underexamined manuscript known as 'The Pathology of Revivalism' (1947), in which we glimpse O'Nolan as a cultural critic and a dissident voice for Ireland's post-revolutionary professional class. Finally, the conclusion presents a series of more generalizable observations about the status of form and content in O'Nolan's work and his solution to the problem of choosing between aesthetic autonomy versus or engagement with the mass market.

⁸⁰ Colin McCabe, 'Finnegans Wake at fifty', *Critical Quarterly*, 31.4 (1989), 3–5 (p. 5), qtd. in Allen, *Modernism, Ireland the Civil War*, p. 20.

⁸¹ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 32, citing Wolin, 'Modernism vs. Postmodernism', p. 16.

Chapter 1 - *Blather*, *Razze* and Dada: the early journalism

1.1. Introduction: *Blather*

On 1 October 1934 Niall Sheridan writes to Niall Montgomery and mentions *Blather*, the comic magazine project in which they, along with Brian's brother Ciarán, are currently engaged (*MBM*, pp. 7–11). 'I believe The O'Blather himself was looking for me after I left town', he writes. 'If you see Brian, tell him to write me giving me some idea of the dope he wants. Tell him his second issue has my approval' (*L*, p. 5). Sheridan's reference to O'Nolan as 'The O'Blather himself' and the mock-conspiratorial intonation of 'the dope he wants' and 'has my approval' is an exact fit for the 'openly rebellious pose' of *Blather*'s 'insurrectionist manifesto' as it is described by the editors of the recent *Problems with Authority*, which explores O'Nolan's anti-authoritarian streak.¹ As a collective, O'Nolan and his friends affect the stance of an intimidating literary gang, 'an intellectual Mafia'.² Accordingly, in 1971 Montgomery remembers *Blather* as 'a magazine, in the military sense of the word, perhaps'.³ Its opening manifesto is a comic projection of menace and bravado which exemplifies the 'slip from emancipatory revolution to authoritarianism' that is found in O'Nolan's work.⁴ The manifesto in the first issue promises that

Every nerve will be strained towards the achievement of the BLATHER Revolution and the establishment of the BLATHER Dictatorship, followed by the inauguration of the BLATHER Communist Monarchy. Gunplay will be rife, the Motherland will be soaked in a bath of blood, Chinese Tong Wars will stalk the land. But we will win the day and the brutal military heel of BLATHER will crush the neck of its enemies.⁵

Here the allusions to Bolshevik revolution followed by Stalinist terror are blended with a reference to the 'Tong Wars' fought between Chinese gangs in American cities

¹ Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and John McCourt, 'Editors' introduction' in *Problems with Authority*, pp. 1–18 (p. 1).

² Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles' in *Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, pp. 32–53 (p. 35).

³ Niall Montgomery, 'An Aristophanic Sorcerer', *The Lace Curtain*, 4 (Summer 1971), 74–76 (p. 74).

⁴ Borg, Fagan and McCourt, 'Editors' introduction', p. 4.

⁵ 'BLATHER is here', *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 3; repr. in *MBM*, pp. 96–97.

in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and the Old Testament rhetoric of *Blather*'s promise to 'crush the neck of its enemies'.⁶ *Blather* lasted for five monthly issues and finished in January 1935 (skipping September). Like O'Nolan's other journalistic writing, it has steadily grown in esteem and prominence in accounts of his life and works.

In 1973, Ciarán Ó Nualláin confirms his involvement but is quite dismissive of the project. He says *Blather* was founded by his brother 'to amuse himself' and that the 'style is poor enough – it was modelled on an English comic paper called *Rosslé*'. He describes his own articles as 'within the *Blather* format' but 'woefully clumsy'.⁷ Anne Clissmann, aiming in 1975 to 'present it rather than comment on it', describes *Blather* as 'purely comic': a 'remarkable and uninhibited vehicle for O'Nolan' which consists of 'sketches, short stories, puns, bad poetry, Irish lessons, improbable limericks and remarkable inventions'. She suggests that if '*At Swim* was to be an anti-novel, *Blather* was, if such a thing is possible, an anti-magazine'.⁸ In 1989 Anthony Cronin also acknowledges the English source, writing that 'its main principle was outrage and in this it was modelled on an English contemporary, *Razzele*'. Cronin highlights its political context: the victory of Fianna Fáil in 1932, which is treated by the right 'as if it were a victory for extreme left-wing republicanism', and the rise of Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts as a 'para-fascist organization' in response. However, Cronin also describes the magazine's response to political events as 'juvenile' and feels that the manifesto's promise of 'black or savagely satirical' humour is unfulfilled. *Blather*, he concludes, is 'a noteworthy and sometimes a coruscating performance, if somewhat self-centred and lacking in direction'.⁹

Thomas F. Shea, whose 1992 book on O'Nolan includes a chapter on his contribution to the student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather* entitled 'The Early Experiments', is more admiring. Like Clissmann, Shea regards these early magazines as an important incubator for the metafictional strategies that O'Nolan will develop afterwards. Whilst '[at] times, O'Brien may appear as merely a clever fellow largely

⁶ See 'The War of the Tongs' in Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (London: Arrow, 2002), pp. 277–201; see Joshua 10:24 for the Biblical reference.

⁷ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The early years of Brian O'Nolan, Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen*, trans. by Róisín Ní Nualláin, ed. by Niall O'Nolan (Dublin: Lilliput, 1998), pp. 103–104. First publ. as *Óige an Déarthár .i. Myles na gCopaleen* (Baile atha Cliath: Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teo, 1973).

⁸ Clissmann, p. 57.

⁹ Cronin, pp. 72–74.

interested in self-congratulatory word games', he writes, the 'show is telling' and his 'university publications present witty, humorous, and thoughtful probings of the vital theoretical interactions negotiated between an author and modes of discourse'. Shea therefore reproduces skits in *Blather* related to the practice of novel-writing (such as 'Hash', which presents 'the good bits' of 'eleven or twelve novels' in one sequence) and focuses his reading on the aspects of both magazines which prefigure the techniques of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.¹⁰

The risk of reading *Blather* from the vantage point of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is that its own status as produced textual object, with its own set of intertexts, may be effaced. Recent readings have made more extensive efforts to situate *Blather* in the context of the magazine culture of its time. A discussion by Carol Taaffe, to which the conclusions of this chapter are indebted, advances a reading of O'Nolan as a writer 'of modernist credentials who [...] addressed a wide and responsive readership' and highlights the importance of *Blather's* clear orientation towards the wider milieu of Irish popular culture. Taaffe explores *Blather's* 'tendency to use Irish popular culture (and its Anglo-American influences) as a means of undercutting the dominant political and cultural narratives of the young Irish state'.¹¹ The example she cites from *Blather*, 'Eachtraí Shearluic' ['The Adventures of Sherlock'], creates forms of 'Anglo-Irish fusion' to carnivalize 'the contradictions and discontinuities in the political and cultural inheritance of the new state'.¹² Joseph Brooker's earlier account of *Blather* also pays attention to its local context and, in addition, suggests that there is an 'ironic echo' of the continental avant-garde in the magazine:

Blather, like O'Nolan's other projects, had diverse sources. It intervened in a local market dominated by *Dublin Opinion*, a rival often geyed in the pages of *Blather*. Its tone appears to draw on a contemporary English comic publication, *Razxle* – albeit with a distinctively Irish content replacing that of the London magazine, and with political satire far outweighing *Razxle's* barrage of sexual innuendo. At the same time, *Blather* can productively be

¹⁰ Thomas F. Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 49; 'Hash', *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 12, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 125–27.

¹¹ Carol Taaffe, "'irreverence moving towards the blasphemous": Brian O'Nolan, *Blather* and Irish popular culture', in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 21–33 (p. 33).

¹² Carol Taaffe, 'irreverence moving towards the blasphemous', pp. 27, 28–30.

read as an ironic echo of those European avant-garde groups – Futurism, Dada and Surrealism – in which the individual artist was also a member of the collaborative group.¹³

This chapter builds on the work of Brooker and Taaffe by arguing that objects of popular and avant-garde print culture deserve to be placed alongside the more established set of contexts for O’Nolan’s experiments with form in his journalism and novels. Firstly, it conducts a detailed comparison of *Blather* with its principal model, *Razzle*, arguing that *Blather* borrows its overall tone and several specific features from *Razzle* and that strategies used in *Razzle* have some significance not just for *Blather* but also for O’Nolan’s subsequent work. However, the chapter also observes that O’Nolan’s magazine does not simply mimic *Razzle*. Instead, *Blather* substitutes the predictable format of *Razzle* for a more unstable and complex subversion of the magazine genre which requires that we look further afield for contexts. Ian Ó Caoimh has recently described Brian and Ciarán O’Nolan’s early collaborations as ‘subversive Dadaesque publishing enterprises’ and Brooker suggests elsewhere that the O’Nolan circle’s project is at this point ‘a belated Dublin burlesque of Dada’, with ‘*Blather* as its eccentric, sputtering vehicle’, observing that ‘[it] is as though O’Nolan and company hold to a caricatured version of Bürger’s account of modernism’.¹⁴ My discussion develops the O’Nolan / Dada comparison further and makes it more specific by considering the example of *Der Dada* (1919–20). This short-lived publication of the Berlin Dadaists exhibits some of the same formal characteristics as *Blather* and its politicized orientation towards the masses parallels *Blather*’s own engagement with politics and popular culture.

1.2. *Razzle*

Razzle is a comic and soft-pornographic publication produced in London during the 1930s and early 1940s. Contradicting Ciarán Ó Nualláin’s recollection that *Razzle*,

¹³ Brooker, p. 19.

¹⁴ Ian Ó Caoimh, ‘The ideal and the ironic: incongruous Irelands in *An Béal Bocht*, *No Laughing Matter* and Ciarán Ó Nualláin’s *Óige an Dearthár*’, in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 152–168 (p. 155); Joseph Brooker, ‘Children of Destiny: Brian O’Nolan and the Irish Ready-Made School’, <<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/172/>> [accessed 13 August 2019], pp. 11–12. First publ. as ‘A balloon filled with verbal gas: *Blather* and the Irish ready-made school’, *Precursors and Aftermaths: Literature in English, 1914–1945* 2.1 (2003), 74–98.

'like *Blather* had only a brief life', the English magazine appears to have been somewhat more successful than *Blather*.¹⁵ *Razzele*'s circulation is not known but it gives a Fleet Street address, is published monthly between 1932 and 1941 and claims to have an international readership.¹⁶ The similarities between the two publications begin with their opening manifestos. The first edition of *Razzele* in September 1932 announces that 'THERE IS PRACTICALLY NOTHING WE DO NOT STAND FOR' and *Blather* responds in August 1934 by stating that it is 'The Only Paper Exclusively Devoted to the Interests of Clay-Pigeon Shooting in Ireland'.¹⁷ *Razzele*'s opening editorial reads in a similar way to *Blather*'s, albeit from an English satirical vantage-point (and it should be noted that Éamon de Valera appears frequently in both magazines):

Every time a movement catches our eye we shall throw ourselves body and soul into it, showing no petty preference for friend over foe. We shall hit where we see a head. We have confidence in the sanity of the British race. We cannot explain this. If there is anybody who does not hold the same views as we do, he is a cad and a bully.

Buy British! We say. Not Frenchmen or Germans, or Americans, but British! It is no excuse to say you don't know where to go to get them. They are selling them at Westminster.

A spirit of peace is brooding over the Empire. We have finished with Gandhi, and started with Mr. de Valera. When we have finished with Mr. de Valera, Mr. Gandhi will be ready for us to begin all over again. Then Mr. de Valera will have to wait his turn. That's Peace, that was!

We stand for Empire Free Trade. We don't know why we stand for it, and we don't care. It is one of those things a decent Englishman stands for instinctively.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, p. 104.

¹⁶ 'Our Own News', *Razzele*, 1.5 (January 1933), p. 158. Dates based on listings in *Willing's Press Guide*, 1932–1941.

¹⁷ *Razzele*, 1.1 (September 1932), front cover; *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 3.

¹⁸ 'Our Policy – Without Fear or Fever', *Razzele*, 1.1 (September 1932), p. 3.

However, upon turning the page the reader discovers another declaration of intent, a second editorial entitled ‘The First Razzle’ which contains an illustration consisting of a set of black, grey and white circles which, we are told, is ‘[a] sample of RAZZLE magnified 68 ½ times’ compared with samples of ‘our nearest rival’ and ‘the Christian Science Monitor’ respectively. This illustration is followed by several definitions of ‘what a Razzle is’ and finally, at the bottom of the page, the explanation that this ‘*should have been the first page, but we hated the look of it*’ (emphasis in original).¹⁹ Brooker notes that *Blather*’s tone ‘slides from mode to mode with mercurial ease, parodying sundry targets, then collapsing in on itself’.²⁰ Whilst it ‘sets up the forms and functions of a modern magazine’, he suggests, *Blather* ‘has no intention of seeing them through’.²¹ For *Razzle* to publish one editorial and then follow it with the draft of an earlier version is a remarkably similar approach: the faux-imperialist mode of the first, politicized editorial slides into the farcical comedy of the second one, and the final explanation in italics collapses both modes by exposing the editorial team’s choices. *Razzle*’s use of printed diagrams to ape scientific discourse, inviting readers to inspect and compare the different shades of grey, seems also to inspire *Blather*’s own play with the potential of the printed text to interact with scientific processes of observation and measurement. In the second issue there is a bar chart of *Blather*’s projected decline in circulation from 60 copies to ‘two copies’ which ‘in the scale in which our diagram is drawn is not visible to the naked eye’ and the reader is invited to attempt various experiments in order to reveal the invisible final bar.²² Technical methods of magnification and the possibilities they suggest of extending normal perception to an infinite degree feature in the recursive inventions of Sergeant MacCruiskeen in O’Nolan’s second novel, *The Third Policeman*, such as the ‘spear’ which, as MacCruiskeen tells the narrator,

is so thin that it could go into your hand and out in the other extremity externally and you would not feel a bit of it and you would see nothing and hear nothing. It is so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could

¹⁹ ‘The First Razzle’, *Razzle*, 1.1 (September 1932), p. 4.

²⁰ Brooker, p. 21.

²¹ Brooker, p. 21.

²² ‘Our Tottering Circulation’, *Blather*, 1.2 (October 1934), p. 35, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 123–24.

spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end. (CN, p. 280)

This is one example of a line of influence that suggests that the surreal humour of *Razzle* may be part of the impetus for tropes and tendencies in *Blather* which reappear in O’Nolan’s novels.

More obvious borrowings include the features in *Blather* that are directly lifted from *Razzle*. The excruciating verse of *Blather*’s ‘Our Wretched Rhymes’ in its various iterations is derived from ‘Razzle Rhymes’.²³ The phrasebook offered in the November 1934 issue, ‘Our Handy Vocabulars’, which claims to be the work of ‘a French polisher by profession’,²⁴ is a less lewd adaptation of *Razzle*’s version of a do-it-yourself language course or travel dictionary, ‘Polish Up Your French!’, in which an English tourist attempts to buy pornographic postcards in France.²⁵ Moreover, the ‘Spot the Stars’ competition in *Razzle* is a direct model for the competition to win ‘Pin Money’ in *Blather*.²⁶ Both competitions require readers to misidentify famous figures from photomontages and call into question their own status as competitions. In the *Razzle* version readers are told:

We may as well admit that whether you spot these stars or not is a matter of complete indifference to us. The object of a SPOT THE STARS contest is to make money for somebody, but as we can see no way of making money out of this one we have lost interest.²⁷

Even some of the strangest proposals of *Blather*, such as when it promises to ‘produce our second Christmas number around June’, are anticipated by *Razzle*.²⁸ In 1932 the English magazine announces an initiative ‘without parallel in modern journalism’ to satisfy the huge demand for its Christmas edition by producing

²³ ‘Our Wretched Rimes’, *Blather*, 1.4 (December 1934), p.74, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 119–20, and ‘More Razzle Rhymes’, *Razzle*, 1.4 (December 1932), p. 104.

²⁴ ‘Our Handy Vocabulars’, *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), p. 58, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 145–47.

²⁵ ‘Polish Up Your French!’, *Razzle*, 1.4 (December 1932), p. 108.

²⁶ ‘£30 in Pin—Money For Readers! Our Competition: as Simple as Hell’, *Blather*, 1.5 (January 1935), pp. 92–93, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 138–41.

²⁷ ‘Spot The Stars —Great New Competition’, *Razzle*, 1.1 (September 1932), p. 8.

²⁸ ‘Our Handy Vocabulars’, *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), p. 58.

‘another Christmas Number next month’; *Razzle* is therefore not far wrong when it predicts that ‘without doubt’ the tactic ‘will be copied largely next year’.²⁹ *Blather*’s overfamiliar bullying of its own readership is also inspired by the side-remarks in *Razzle*, such as

Listen, you! If you don’t like this page, somebody else might; and how are we to know? Here we are slaving our fingers to the bone and all we get are a lot of dirty looks. As your wife says, turn over and shut up.³⁰

Razzle also prefigures O’Nolan’s manufactured letter controversy in the *Irish Times* by including plenty of fake letters from readers (‘We guarantee that all the letters published below are genuine. We ought to know seeing that we wrote them’).³¹ Much like *Blather*, *Razzle*’s humour is invariably metaleptic, exposing the magazine as a contrived textual object in titles like ‘1933 – And You (And You): Startling Leader Specially Built for “Razzle” by Our Special Leader Writer’.³² Similarly, the studied nonsense of ‘Razzle’s Drawing Lesson’ could easily be mistaken for an article in *Blather*.

Now just about the time of the Agrarian Revolution, when Agraria was the battle-ground of two warring factions, when brother fought brother, and father fought son, and sister put her tongue out at the girl across the way, the fast hussy, the peasants of EnglandWhat? Oh, so this is a *drawing* lesson, is it, not history? Well, there’s carelessness for you, I give you my word. Go on, take it, I’ve got some more words.³³

These close similarities have important implications for the way we understand and situate the *Blather* project. Despite the anarchic editorial disavowals of the magazine’s value and its possibility of achieving success, it is likely that the O’Nolan circle adopt

²⁹ ‘Oh Goody! A Christmas Number!’, *Razzle*, 1.4 (December 1932), p. 100.

³⁰ Inset, *Razzle* 1.4 (December 1932), p. 118.

³¹ ‘Write to “Razzle” About It’, *Razzle*, 1.1 (September 1932), p. 21. For the *Irish Times* letters controversy, see *L*, pp. 12–34.

³² ‘1933 – And You (And You)’, *Razzle*, 1.5 (January 1933), p. 130.

³³ ‘Razzle’s Drawing Lesson’, *Razzle*, 2.1 (September 1933). No page numbers are included in the second volume.

much of the format and experimental humour of *Razzele* because they feel that there is already a proven marketplace and audience for this kind of humour. In turn, *Razzele* may owe its own style of humour to its immediate comic precursors in the history of the English popular magazine such as ‘the half-penny dreadfuller’ *Comic Cuts*.³⁴ Beginning publication in 1890, *Comic Cuts* is a mass market magazine which conducts a similarly intimate rapport with its readers when compared with the tone adopted by *Razzele* and *Blather*:

How is it possible for any one to provide an illustrated paper, containing nearly fifty pictures, over eighteen thousand words, and many valuable prizes, for a halfpenny? Well, it is possible to do it, but that is all. I feel sure that the public will appreciate the fact that they are getting full value for their money, and will therefore buy the paper in immense numbers weekly.³⁵

Comic Cuts also experiments with form by combining cartoons, early comic strips, humorous vignettes and lists of suspect one-liner facts like ‘Napoleon had a strong dislike for cats’ in a feature entitled ‘Tiny Chips’.³⁶ From an early stage, the novel relationship between periodicals and their audiences, who are often both readers and contributors, establishes a new context for writing which invites metaleptic formal experimentation. For example, in June 1814, *The Lady’s Magazine* runs a serial entitled ‘The Author’s Portfolio’, which represents ‘the unpublished efforts of an unknown writer whose death is reported in its first instalment’, submitted to the magazine by a landlady after she finds them with the note “‘Messrs Robinson, for publication in the “Lady’s Magazine”’.”³⁷

Alongside the British magazine *Razzele* and its own forebears, *Blather* is also informed by the writing practices of O’Nolan’s student milieu in University College Dublin. For example, Clissmann observes that there is a continuity between

³⁴ Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt, *Revolutions from Grub Street: A History of Magazine Publishing in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 31.

³⁵ ‘The Editor Talks To His New Friends’, *Comic Cuts*, 1.1 (17 May 1890), p. 2.

³⁶ ‘Tiny Chips’, *Comic Cuts*, 1.1 (17 May 1890), p. 7.

³⁷ Jennie Batchelor, ‘The free press: payment, professionalism and the Lady’s Magazine’, <<https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/ladys-magazine/2016/05/10/the-free-press-payment-professionalism-and-the-ladys-magazine/>> [accessed 17 October 2017], citing *The Lady’s Magazine*, 35 (June 1814), p. 251.

O’Nolan’s characteristic metaleptic tactics and the style of humour developed by his predecessor writers for the UCD publication *Combthrom Féinne* (or ‘Fair Play’, but titled the *National Student* before and after O’Nolan’s tenure as editor). She suggests that it is likely that ‘this particular type of humour influenced O’Nolan to a very great extent so that he wrote largely in response to it and to satisfy the needs of a known audience’.³⁸ Clissmann, Shea and Brooker rightly observe that *Blather*, produced in the months after O’Nolan completes his university studies, goes further than *Combthrom Féinne* in its use of experiments with narrative authority which anticipate the developments of O’Nolan’s novels.³⁹ However, if this development is itself partially based on an imitation of *Razxle* then the magazine, and popular print culture more widely, emerges as a significant influence on the O’Nolan circle’s literary practice. Keith Hopper calls attention to ‘a fragmented and playfully digressive style’ in *At Swim-Two-Birds* which ‘deliberately usurps reader expectation, and flaunts its own eclectic make-up: pub-talk, legend, poetry, parody and pastiche all co-exist and interact dynamically’; ‘underlying this carnival revelry’, Hopper argues, ‘is the concomitant self-doubt engendered by its deconstructions that language is insufficient in its capacity to generate or mediate reality’.⁴⁰ Hopper’s description aptly fits the examples provided from *Razxle* in this chapter. One might even go as far as to suggest that, along with the expectations of UCD’s particular style of student journalism, the influence of this magazine helps to explain the development of O’Nolan’s modernism in the playful, ironic and radically deconstructive direction which has sometimes been designated as anticipating the post-modernist turn. *Razxle* can therefore be placed alongside a more established set of influences on O’Nolan’s use of metafictional devices, which include *Point Counter Point* by Aldous Huxley (1928), *The Various Lives of Marcus Igoe* by Brinsley MacNamara (1929) and *Six Characters in Search of An Author* by Luigi Pirandello (1921), to suggest that *Blather*’s formal practices are located in a broader cultural moment.⁴¹ Indeed, Sue Asbee makes an astute observation when she suggests that, such was the prevalence of ‘self-

³⁸ Clissmann, p. 65.

³⁹ Clissmann, p. 57; Shea, p. 49; Brooker, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Hopper, p. 39.

⁴¹ Hopper, pp. 72, 110. The Pirandello comparison is discussed at length in Michael McLoughlin, ‘At Swim Six Characters or Two Birds in Search of an Author’, *The Yearbook of the Society for Pirandello Studies*, 12 (1992), 24–31.

referential' literary structures in experimental fiction at the time of its writing, *At Swim-Two-Birds* actually critiques a freshly established convention in literary fiction instead of being part of that practice's foundational moment.⁴²

The fact that *Blather* is participating in a dialogue with a range of influences which make use of metaleptic devices, for a range of purposes, makes it important to understand what is different about its own use of experimentation with form. *Razzele* subordinates its metafictional humour to what appear to be its commercial considerations; one marker of this different context is that fact that, unlike *Blather* – and anticipating the future use of the *Razzele* brand name for pornographic publications – the English magazine is full of photographs and illustrations of half-naked women. This soft pornographic intention also imposes a certain predictability on its format. Each two-page spread generally opens, on the verso side, with a short metafictional parody of a newspaper or magazine feature like a lifestyle piece, sporting report, news announcement or editorial (usually including a photo of a woman). On the recto side, this piece is invariably accompanied by an unrelated cartoon: a large drawing with one short caption beneath it. Most of these cartoons are pictures of women in underwear and the captions are dry to the point of dullness; often no more than a justification for including the illustration. By adopting this format the writers of *Razzele* seem to be hedging their bets in order to retain the interest of their readers: if the metafictional parody on the verso side fails to amuse then readers are compensated by the cartoon on the other side.

Although it also consistently mixes what are sometimes daring cartoons with its articles, O'Nolan's magazine complicates the format established by *Razzele*, displaying an impulse to upset any sort of consistent structure and, as Taaffe argues, making use of the *non sequitur* as a 'central tool in its comic arsenal'.⁴³ For example, in the third issue (November 1934) there is the following sequence from pages 49 to 52. First, an announcement of the evening programme of the *Blather* radio station, 2BL, which sets itself up in competition with Ireland's national radio broadcaster, 2RN (which relocated from Dublin to Athlone in 1933):⁴⁴

⁴² Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1991), p. 25.

⁴³ Taaffe, 'Brian O'Nolan, *Blather* and Popular Culture', p. 27.

⁴⁴ Gibbons analyses the development of Irish radio in *Transformations in Irish Culture*, pp. 70–77

The objects of the station are two-fold, even manifold. The primary object is to give Athlone hell. We are going to give it hell every night, and when we are finished giving it hell we are going to give it red hell. We are going to jam and jam and jam. We are going to perforate its wretched programmes with screams and whistles and scrapings and head-noises and streams of bad language.⁴⁵

This is followed by a page of bad rhymes not dissimilar to ‘Razzle Rhymes’ but with the addition of a decontextualized cliché such as ‘One Can’t be too Careful’ or ‘Gad! The Brutality of Nature’ beneath each couplet. Then, in two columns, there follows ‘Our Sports Club’, a report illustrated by de Valera’s head pasted onto a long-jumper’s body, accompanied on the other side by ‘Our Two-Fisted Tirades’, a couple of letters The O’Blather has written attacking the *United Ireland* magazine and the Gaiety Theatre.⁴⁶ Then comes ‘Our Lovely Page of Pictures’, featuring The O’Blather again, but this time as the caption to an engraving of a man riding a large tricycle with wooden wheels who is ‘going to call the cattle home across the sands of Dee’.

Whilst the reading experience of *Razzle* has a certain drumbeat, interrupted occasionally by some particularly strange article, *Blather*’s continuous transformations produce a different effect: the will of The O’Blather as its putative narrative grounding mutates through genres and media, merging at times with known or fictional figures and then pulling away from them again. No consistent set of qualities or characteristics emerges from *Blather* when it is compared to the magazines to which it responds and we are forced to define it, like Clissmann, in negative terms, as an ‘anti-magazine’.⁴⁷ On one hand, *Blather* is determined to be an entertaining comic magazine, both modelled on and responding to popular print culture. On the other, *Blather*’s refusal to contain its jokes within the boundaries of a regularized format or respect a rhythm of reader reception pushes it out of the domain of the popular and into the peripheral zone of the avant-garde.

⁴⁵ Repr. in *MBM*, pp. 131–32.

⁴⁶ Repr. in *MBM*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Clissmann, p. 57.

1.3. Dada

Julian Hanna's recent analysis of the manifestos in *Blather* and *At-Swim* notes that the *Blather* manifesto's 'antagonism toward readers ties it to Dada and Vorticism, and to *transition*'s "Revolution of the Word".⁴⁸ This part of the chapter takes the Dada comparison further by arguing that the rest of *Blather* also resembles the practices of the Berlin Dada publication *Der Dada* and other Dada magazines in three respects. Firstly, both *Blather* and the contributors to *Der Dada* employ an extended identity trope in which the terms 'blather' and 'dada' are applied to a network of movements, products and organisations which grows to comic proportions. Secondly, *Blather*, *Der Dada* and other magazines of the German Dada movement undertake a politicized subversion of popular print culture and its conservative messages using fake competitions and photomontage. Finally, the complex use of advertising material in *Blather* can be compared to the blend of genuine and hoax advertising messages which is pioneered in *Der Dada*.

It's clear, as this part of the chapter hopes to show, that Dadaist magazines and works are known to the O'Nolan circle and an influence on their work. Niall Montgomery's career in avant-garde poetry and his unpublished book project, entitled *Terminal*, make him a key reference point in this respect.⁴⁹ For example, Christine O'Neil records Montgomery and Denis Devlin's project in the 1930s to translate 'more than 200 pages' of modernist and avant-garde French poetry into Irish, a corpus which included work by Tristan Tzara, the Swiss-born poet and performance artist who acted as a bridge between the Paris and Berlin Dada scenes.⁵⁰ Two of these poems appear in *Ireland To-day*.⁵¹ Montgomery publishes an article in the *Lace Curtain* in 1974 which contains the most explicit commentary on Dada by any member of the O'Nolan circle. He offers a sophisticated standpoint on the Dadaist form of relative aesthetic autonomy and its critique of art and society:

⁴⁸ Julian Hanna, 'Flann O'Brien's Anti-Manifestos', *E-rea*, 15.2 (2018)

<<http://journals.openedition.org/erea/6263>> [accessed 13 March 2019], paragraph 18 of 24.

⁴⁹ Montgomery's collected poems are currently under publication by Joseph LaBine, in collaboration with the Montgomery Estate.

⁵⁰ O'Neill, *Niall Montgomery Dublinman*, p. 85.

⁵¹ Montgomery's 'Westwego', a translation into Irish of a French poem by Philippe Soupault, appeared in *Ireland To-day*, 2.9 (September 1937), 40, 56 and his 'Adharca fiadhaigh', a translation of Guillaume Apollinaire, was published in *Ireland To-day*, 2.12 (December 1937), 56.

Dada is now about sixty years old. People who are of the same age tend to resent modern art and to see it simply as a factitious revival of a *démodé* type of art. Dada was anti-society and anti-art in its objects but, oddly, its means were the means of art. One can see that in a comparison between, for instance, the poems of Tristan Tzara and the poems of somebody who was not a Dadaist, but who was an experimenter in language and was a very modern, incoherent sort of fellow – Eugene Jolas. His poems are dreadful. The comparison shows that, though Tzara belonged to an anti-art movement, he was nothing more (nothing less) than an artist. Today the work of the stochastic poets, the concrete poets, the conceptual poets, is all out of Dada, but the concept is wider, it's more an assault on art and on society generally, it's more of a wider perspective, the Chairman Mao's view, the view of the Long March in which art and culture are marked "Not Wanted on the Voyage".⁵²

By the 1970s, Montgomery reaches an understanding of Dada's significance which resembles Bürger's view on its social function and the category recognition of artistic institutions it brings about, as well as the modification of Bürger's theory proposed by Murphy (citing Wolin), that is, the nature of avant-garde art's 'de-aestheticized autonomy'.⁵³ As Montgomery puts it, Dada is anti-art that continues to use the 'means of art' to conduct 'an assault on art and on society generally'. Montgomery therefore presents a convincing link between the O'Nolan circle and Dada. However, it's necessary to turn to earlier sources to see how much of this understanding had already begun to take shape in the 1930s and 1940s, when Montgomery is actively collaborating with O'Nolan's own creative projects.

There are suggestions of an association between the Myles na gCopaleen persona and Dada in *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns and letters published in the *Irish Times* in the 1940s. The Dadaist most frequently referred to in the column is Tzara. In 1942 he is described by Myles as one of those artists of a 'finer intellect' who responds to 'the inadequacy of [...] the most highly developed languages to the exigencies of

⁵² Niall Montgomery, 'Bird Lives', *Lace Curtain*, 5 (Spring 1974), 39–48 (p. 48). Thank-you to Joseph LaBine for identifying this article.

⁵³ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 32, citing Wolin, 'Modernism vs. Postmodernism', p. 16.

human thought, to the nuances of interpsychic communication, to the expression of the silent agonised pathologies of the post-Versailles epoch' by putting 'his unhappy shirt on his dada (Fr. for hobby-horse as you must surely know)' (*CL*, 27 November 1942, p. 3). The definition of 'dada' in parentheses may be an allusion to an article by one of Tzara's Berlin collaborators, Richard Huelsenbeck. In the 1936 edition of *transition*, Huelsenbeck explains in an English-language article that he and Hugo Ball chose the name 'Dada' because '[it] is a children's word meaning hobby-horse'.⁵⁴ More proximately, Myles may be referring to a January 1942 article written for *Commentary* magazine by the painter, Basil Rákóczi, where Rákóczi suggests that 'Gauguin wrote: "Sometimes I went back very far, further than the horses of the Parthenon, as far as the dada of my infancy, the good rocking horse"'.⁵⁵

Tzara and Dada are subsequently associated with Myles na gCopaleen in the pages of the *Irish Times* in an exchange that takes place in 1946 about Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), when Stuart Gilbert's English translation, *The Outsider*, appears. Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing as 'Donat O'Donnell', remarks that the book 'bears a striking resemblance to the "dadaism" with which Paris was afflicted after the first World War [...] the symptoms are different, but the disease is the same'.⁵⁶ In response, the English pacifist and anarchist Alex Comfort writes in to criticize the reviewer's 'prodigiously heavy view' of the Dadaists. In their defence, he suggests that

[it] so happens that the *Irish Times* publishes regularly the only surviving Dadaist of a war-torn Europe – namely, Myles na gCopaleen – and I cannot help thinking that those who are angry with the more boisterous of Dada's social satirists should logically be equally angry with Myles. He doesn't make public speeches in a diving-suit, so far as I know, but he guys lunacy by showing it up, and that, to my mind, is all that Dada ever did.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Huelsenbeck, 'Dada Lives', p. 78.

⁵⁵ Basil Rákóczi, 'Painting The Unconscious', *Commentary*, 1.3 (January 1941), 12, 14 (p. 12). See chapter six for a discussion of Myles and the White Stag group of Rákóczi and Kenneth Hall, two English artists resident in Dublin during the Emergency who espouse their own form of 'Subjective Art', inspired by Jungian psychology and continental Surrealism.

⁵⁶ Donat O'Donnell [Conor Cruise O'Brien], 'Dada Comes of Age', *Irish Times*, 7 September 1946, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Letter by Alex Comfort, *Irish Times*, 16 September 1946, p. 5.

Myles quotes from the letter in his column a few days later, feigning his bewilderment at what Comfort suggests by comparing it to the statements ‘The *Daily Express* publishes Lord Beaverbrook’ and ‘The Government is the servant of the State’ (CL, 20 September 1946, p. 4). However, at first it seems that his outrage is not because of the accusation that he is a Dadaist but due to

the sly sneer that all my private speeches are delivered in a diving suit, owner unstated!! All I will say is this: I am no coward. If I do not make public speeches in a diving suit, irrespective of who made them there, that is my business and if there be anything more mysterious than my business, name it! (CL, 20 September 1946, p. 4)

Then, after suggesting that the ‘reader’ in question is ‘casting to the Wynnes Des Cression, Ma Desty and Prudence’ for ‘*accusing* My Most Gross Uncarnal Beatitude *of writing the leading articles every day*, of being in a ward (stet) “the only surviving Dadaist”’, Myles nevertheless recalls that ‘[mind] you, I knew them all. I knew Tristan Tzara well and he had a great grá for me. I knew Perét and Picabia and, *of course*, Willie Yeats, who was all their dadas’ (CL, 20 September 1946, p. 4 – original emphasis).

Myles not only weaves his way around a straightforward refutation of Comfort’s suggestion by complicating it with a strategy of deliberate misreading, he proceeds to set himself up alongside the figures of Dadaism using another tactic, the fictional autobiography which, as shall be discussed below, parallels the tactics of Berlin Dadaists like Johannes Baader. The column gives significant credit to Comfort’s suggestion by constructing such a labyrinthine performance in response, and it should be noted that, given Yeats’s involvement in European Expressionist, Surrealist and Absurdist drama, the suggested association between Yeats and Dada is not as bizarre as it seems.⁵⁸ O’Nolan’s proclivity to mention Tzara in his column makes it more likely that when the opening manifesto of *Blather* promises that: ‘Gunplay will be rife, the Motherland will be soaked in a bath of blood’ and ‘Chinese Tong Wars will stalk the land’, there are echoes of Tzara’s 1918 *Dada Manifesto* where he states that the movement is ‘a downpour of maledictions as tropically abundant as

⁵⁸ See Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

vertiginous vegetation, resin and rain are our sweat, we bleed and burn with thirst, our blood is vigour'.⁵⁹

As Hanna observes, *Blather*'s 'antagonism toward readers ties it' not only 'to Dada and Vorticism' but also 'to *transition*'s "Revolution of the Word".⁶⁰ Montgomery compares *transition*'s editor Eugene Jolas to Dada in 1974 and he is an important link between the circle and European Dadaism. As discussed in chapter two, whilst writing for *Blather* O'Nolan and his friends were reading *transition*, which prints episodes of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* when it is serialized, prior to publication, as *Work in Progress*.⁶¹ From 1932, Jolas publishes poems and prose by former Dadaists like Hans Arp, Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters 'with deliberate frequency'.⁶² This new burst of activity enables Richard Huelsenbeck to declare in its pages in 1936 that 'Dada Lives'.⁶³ O'Nolan refers to *transition* in a 1934 article for *Comhbrom Féinne*, in which his persona Brother Barnabas writes that he has 'publicly thumbed Jolas' *transition* in London's fogs'.⁶⁴ In the years immediately after *Blather*, the magazine becomes a publication venue that the O'Nolan circle shares with the Dadaists. Denis Devlin publishes a poem in *transition* in 1936 and Niall Montgomery publishes a Wakean vignette there in 1938.⁶⁵

It is also possible that O'Nolan directly encounters *Der Dada* or other periodicals of the Dada scene. A. J. 'Con' Leventhal mentions 'the young Frenchmen

⁵⁹ Tristan Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto', in *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, ed. and trans. by Alex Danchev (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 136–44 (p. 139).

⁶⁰ Hanna, paragraph 18.

⁶¹ See 'Appendix 2: Publication History of *Work in Progress*/*Finnegans Wake*' in Luca Crispi and Sam Slote, *How Joyce wrote 'Finnegans Wake': A Chapter-by-chapter Genetic Guide* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 490–94, and Dirk van Hulle, *James Joyce's 'Work in Progress': Pre-Book Publications of *Finnegans Wake** (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁶² Cathryn Setz provides the most recent summary of critical approaches to the magazine and her own re-evaluation in 'Transocean: *transition*'s anachronistic zeitgeists', *Modernist Cultures*, 11.1 (2016), 65–85 (p. 69).

⁶³ Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Dada Lives', *transition*, 25 (Fall 1936), 77–80.

⁶⁴ For discussions of the *Work in Progress* pastiches, see chapter two of this thesis, Taaffe, p. 44, and Breandán Ó Conaire, 'Ó Nualláin, na Scéalta "Meán-Ghaelige" & Sem Seoighe,' *Combar*, 71.12 (Nollaig 2011), 29–38 (pp. 35–36). The Brother Barnabas article is 'A brass hat in Bannow Strand', *Comhbrom Féinne*, 7.1 (January 1934), 8–9, repr. in *MBM*, p. 74.

⁶⁵ Denis Devlin, 'You Don't Know a Good Thing When You See It', *transition*, 25 (Fall 1936), 9; Niall Montgomery, 'Swing Tides of March This Time Darling', *transition*, 27 (April–May 1938), 110–13.

known as Dadaists' and their 'Dada weeklies' in a review of *Ulysses* he publishes in his Dadaist-inspired periodical, *The Klaxon*, in 1923–24.⁶⁶ The movement of the wider O'Nolan circle between Dublin and mainland Europe during the 1920s and 1930s would have also afforded access to periodicals of the Dadaists who later publish work in *transition*. Devlin studied at Munich in 1930–1931. Cecil French Salkeld, who appears as Michael Byrne in O'Nolan's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), has a strong connection to the German avant-garde.⁶⁷ He moved to Germany in 1921 and in May 1922 he 'joined the Union of Progressive International Artists in Düsseldorf'. Afterwards he 'exhibited with the Young Rheinland Circle of Painters' and continued to travel between Germany and Ireland 'till late 1925'.⁶⁸ Passport stamps and postcards indicate that O'Nolan himself vacationed in Germany in 1936.⁶⁹

Beyond the general dialogue that *Blather's* manifesto conducts with the avant-garde, the first concrete indication of the magazine's proximity to Dada this chapter discusses is their shared use of what might be termed the 'extended identity trope'. The practice of extending a persona or identity into new categories is clearly traceable in the deliberate over-determination of a movement's main name or identity in the avant-garde manifesto. In reaction to the rules and restrictions of Futurist manifesto statements, the Dadaist manifestos utilize their own emblematic label, 'DADA', as an alternative form of manifesto punctuation which parodically extends the field of their movement's activities instead of prescriptively delimiting it. For example, Hugo Ball's 1916 'Dada Manifesto' opines that 'Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. Dada is the world's best lily-milk soap. Dada Mr Rubiner, dada Mr Korrodi'.⁷⁰ This practice is adopted by Jolas for the manifestos of *transition*. In the 1933 issue, which is

⁶⁶ Lawrence K. Emery [A. J. 'Con' Leventhal], 'The Ulysses of Mr. James Joyce', *Klaxon*, 1 (Winter 1923–24), 15–20 (p. 18); *L*, p. xxxiii.

⁶⁷ Bruce Stewart, 'Denis Devlin (1908–59)', *Ricorso*, <http://www.ricorso.net/rx/az-data/authors/d/Devlin_D1/life.htm> [accessed 30 June 2018]. Joseph LaBine disputes this in 'At Swim-Two Nialls: Sheridan and Montgomery Live in Fiction', a paper presented at at 'Palimpsests: Fifth International Flann O'Brien Conference' (University College Dublin, 16–19 July 2019), where he cites a letter from 'Michael Byrne' parodically invoicing O'Nolan for his contribution to the novel, which he argues is penned by Montgomery on the grounds of typography and stenography (*L*, p. 56–57). Salkeld's German awards and recognitions are mentioned in the 'Notes on Our Contributors' section in *Ireland To-day*, 3.3 (February 1938).

⁶⁸ S. B. Kennedy, 'An Incisive Aesthetic', *Irish Arts Review*, 21.2 (Summer 2004) 90–95 (p. 90).

⁶⁹ *BC*, 24.

⁷⁰ Hugo Ball, 'Dada Manifesto' (1916) in Danchev, pp. 126–130 (p. 128). Translated by Danchev.

subtitled ‘An International Workshop for Orphic Creation’, Jolas publishes one of his ‘Vertigral’ editorial statements, which is entitled ‘Twilight of the Horizontal Age’. In this manifesto he hails ‘the mantic forces of pre-historic man’ and sets out eight statements which follow a formula consisting of ‘The Vertigral Age’ and a verb: ‘brings [...] sees [...] hails [...] believes [...] is re-discovering [...] wants [...] wants [...] wants’.⁷¹ Ball and Jolas’s depiction of a putatively aesthetic movement as simultaneously a chthonic substrate, a set of commercial products and a group of organizations provides an important context for the use of the extended identity trope throughout *Blather* and in O’Nolan’s subsequent journalism.

The first instance of the technique in *Blather* is found in the opening manifesto, which parodies Ball and Jolas by attaching the word ‘Blather’ to a series of organizations and commercial products:

Write to us for the address of your nearest BLATHER Study Circle. Write to us for a free cut-out pattern of the BLATHER Patent Woollen Panties and say good-bye to colds. Write to us for our pamphlet, ‘The BLATHER Attitude on Ping-Pong’.⁷²

The extended identity trope recurs and develops in complexity throughout *Blather* which, Clissmann observes, ‘obviously had so much to offer that it could not be confined within the covers of a small magazine’.⁷³ In the place of a single editorial voice or even multiple voices there arises a complex of O’Blather relatives, institutions and enterprises, often engaged in contradictory objectives, which proliferates around the *Blather* brand name: a radio station; the ‘Blather Sports Club’; a political party; a looming dictatorship and a scheme for distributing free bulls.⁷⁴ There is a drift towards further multiplicity within each category: not one product but a clutch of consumer brands; not a single charity but a network of organizations so extensive that ‘The O’Blather League for Little People’ is ‘the most deserving of our

⁷¹ Eugene Jolas, ‘Twilight of the Horizontal Age’, *transition*, 22 (February 1933), 6.

⁷² ‘BLATHER is here’, *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 3; repr. in *MBM*, pp. 96–97.

⁷³ Clissmann, p. 60.

⁷⁴ All these examples are discussed above, apart from the scheme for distributing free bulls, ‘The Blather Bounty’, *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), 14–15, which is almost certainly a nod to Richard and Maria Edgeworth’s satirical pamphlet, the *Essay on Irish Bulls* (New York: Swaine, 1803).

lesser charities'.⁷⁵ The notion of a comically extended identity repeats itself throughout O'Nolan's work. Myles na gCopaleen, as 'not so much a conventional persona', according to Brooker, but 'an ongoing improvisation' and a 'function of style', multiplies his brand identity across the various associations and institutions of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.⁷⁶ It should be noted that the extended identity trope is an interesting anticipation of the late twentieth-century marketing practice of 'brand extension', wherein a 'parent brand' is redeployed in numerous 'extension categories' with the intention of having them benefit from their connection with the positive qualities of the parent brand, such as 'high quality, likeability and trustworthiness perceptions as well as unique brand-specific associations'.⁷⁷ In 1951 Myles put his identity to work in this way by appearing in an advertisement for O'Dearest mattresses. The illustration, by Meredith Brosnan Warner, shows Myles sitting on a mattress as a Buddha-like figure, holding strings which drag along falling or prostrate satirical targets, as a man kneeling on a copy of the *Irish Times* worships him. The caption reads: 'Omniscient omnipotent Myles / Writes a column in multiple styles, / While chastising the nation / He gets inspiration / From O'Dearest – a Buddha all smiles'.⁷⁸

The extended identity trope as developed in German Dada and O'Nolan's work may have a common ancestor in the inventive use of names in Victorian nonsense writing by Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and Stephen Leacock, a genre which influenced the European and Anglo-American avant-garde through figures like Alfred Jarry and his spurious discipline of 'pataphysics': the examination of imaginary phenomena.⁷⁹ However, this chapter now proposes a more specific context for the

⁷⁵ 'Our Way with Brazen Bribery', *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), p. 43.

⁷⁶ Brooker, p. 90. *The Best of Myles* collection (London: McGibbon & Kee, 1968, repr. by London: Picador, 1977), ed. by Kevin O'Nolan, gave us the categories of 'WAAMA, etc', 'Research Bureau' 'The Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction', 'the District Court', 'Sir Myles na Gopaleen' in its arrangement of the columns into chapters. Taaffe discusses an example of one of these organizations, Myles's version of Seán Ó Faoláin's Working Artists, Actors and Musicians Association, the 'WAAMA League', pp. 140–49.

⁷⁷ Kevin Lane Keller, 'Economic and Behavioral Perspectives on Brand Extension', *Marketing Science*, 31 (September–October 2012), 772–76 (p. 772).

⁷⁸ Meredith Brosnan Warner, original drawing for O'Dearest mattress advertisement featuring Myles na gCopaleen, 1951. *BC*, 17/13.

⁷⁹ Taaffe proposes Victorian nonsense writing as the central influence on *The Third Policeman* (Taaffe, pp. 63–91) and Ondřej Pilný compares O'Nolan's spurious inventions and Jarry's pataphysics in "'Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?": Brian O'Nolan and pataphysics' in Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan

way that *Blather* deploys the extended identity trope in *Der Dada*, a magazine of the Berlin Dadaists involving contributions from Tzara and Huelsenbeck alongside Johannes Baader, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield. *Der Dada* is published in three issues between 1919 and 1920. It is, according to Michael Biro, ‘probably the most famous and iconic of the Berlin Dadaist publications and certainly the journal that attempted to represent the movement most directly’. Realizing the promises of Ball’s 1916 manifesto, this magazine makes use of the extended identity trope throughout by depicting Dada ‘as a contradictory force in politics, religion and aesthetics’ as well as ‘an advertising bureau and a savings bank’.⁸⁰

The second issue of the magazine applies the trope to a named individual by fictionalizing the life and times of one of its key figures, Johannes Baader, in a way which closely resembles the projection of O’Nolan into the guise of ‘The O’Blather himself’, according to Montgomery, and his fictionalized involvement in historical narratives or contemporary politics (*L*, p. 5). The best example of this parallel is found in Baader’s ‘Advertisement for Myself’, an article of December 1919 which is accompanied by a ‘photomontage of Baader’s head surrounded by newspaper text’ and depicts him as the ‘*Oberdada*’ (Superdada). Biro argues that by ‘[juxtaposing] Baader’s (imaginary) rise to political prominence with an account of Germany’s military and political mistakes since 1914, it emphasized Baader’s central role in creating an ‘entirely new world order’ and establishing 1919 as the ‘first year of world peace’.⁸¹ Readers of *Blather* or the later iterations of its themes in *Cruiskeen Lawn* will recognise something in Baader’s assertion that

Hindendorf, Ludenburg are not historical names. There is only one historical name: Baader. These gentlemen, who dangle on the marionette strings of eternity, which I direct, forget that the war was lost because Germany wanted to be wiser than the President of the Universe.⁸²

and Werner Huber (eds), *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), pp. 156–68.

⁸⁰ Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 37–39.

⁸¹ Biro, pp. 39–41.

⁸² Translation by Tobias Harris, Evi Heinz and Kristina Rosenzweig. Original text: ‘Hindendorf, Ludenburg sind keine historischen Namen. Es gibt nur einen historischen Namen: Baader. Diese Herren, die an den Marionettenfäden der Ewigkeit baumeln, die ich lenke, vergessen, dass der Krieg

By mangling the names of political leaders and posing as the true underlying conspiracy, Baader's 'Advertisement for Myself' destabilizes the claims of authoritarian politicians in the wake of Germany's political and economic collapse after World War One. *Blather* is also produced in the aftermath of a constitutional crisis. The Irish variant of fascism became a brief threat to parliamentary democracy in 1933 as a reaction to Fianna Fáil's election in 1932. An influx of large farmers, immiserated by the Economic War, into the ranks of Cumman na nGaedheal led to the rise of the Army Comrades Association and its transformation into the Blueshirts. This 30,000 strong uniformed body of men, which 'had all the trappings of a fascist outfit', led from July 1933 by former police chief Eoin O'Duffy, planned a march on the Dáil in August of that year.⁸³ In May and June 1934, 'major riots against the Blueshirts in Tralee, Kilmallock, Sligo, Limerick and Dublin' by Fianna Fáil supporters, trade unionists and socialists took place.⁸⁴ This threatened coup is the political backdrop when *Blather*'s opening manifesto claims that 'we have O'Duffy in a sack' and when its third issue explains to readers that O'Duffy's resignation from the Fine Gael party is 'but another phase of Ireland's Senior Monthly'. Mirroring Baader's claim to direct political events from behind the scenes, *Blather* declares: 'If you want to know what is happening in Irish political life, read the paper that determines the trend and character of it. Go to your newsagent and ask for BLATHER'.⁸⁵

The second characteristic the magazines share is the subversion of popular culture using photomontage. As discussed, both *Razzle* and *Blather* toy with the possibilities for audience interaction created by the write-in photo competitions common in popular magazines. A Dadaist model for parodying these competitions is John Heartfield's 'Preisaußsschrieben! Wer ist der Schönste?' ('Open Competition! Who is the prettiest?'), a collage of photographs of Germany's leading politicians superimposed on a woman's fan printed on the cover of *Jedermann Sein Eigner Fussball*

verloren ging, weil sie in Deutschland klüger sein wollten als der Präsident des Weltalls'. Johannes Baader, 'Reklame für mich', *Der Dada*, 2 (December 1919), 5–7 (p. 5).

⁸³ Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present* (London & Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 52.

⁸⁴ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp. 53–54.

⁸⁵ 'BLATHER is here', *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 3; repr. in *MBM*, pp. 96–97; 'Our Way with Brazen Bribery', *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), p. 43.

(Every Man His Own Football).⁸⁶ *Jedermann Sein Eigner Fussball* was a protest magazine and precursor to *Der Dada* which sold in its thousands to workers in February 1919 and led to Heartfield's temporary arrest.⁸⁷ Likewise, in Cologne, Hans Arp and Max Ernst 'published a Communist periodical, *Der Ventilator*, some issues of which sold up to twenty thousand copies on the street and at factory and barrack gates, and [which] was banned by the occupying British forces in 1919'.⁸⁸ Political subversion required public spectacles which engaged with a large audience rather than obscure avant-garde experiments. Timothy Benson explains that 'by February 1920, Hausmann and Baader could stage a tour which included an event in Leipzig attended by more than 2,000 spectators'.⁸⁹ Like *Blather*, German Dada activities had an avowedly popular orientation even as they radically experimented with form.

Both periodicals also exploit the comic possibilities of the printed advertisement to create an intermediary position, a standpoint with one foot in commercial practices and another in avant-garde experimentation. As well as advertising itself, its own products, industries and organizations, *Blather* features commercial advertisements that seem barely plausible, even when the shops or products they advertise are genuine. The commercial purpose appears to be partially effaced by an anarchic sense of humour. In the third issue there is an advert for a real shop named 'McHugh Himself', on 39 Talbot Street in Dublin.⁹⁰ But the advert is entitled 'IT'S ROTTEN WRITING ...' and, clearly referencing the magazine in which it appears, continues '[about] things we know nothing about. For instance, big things like Elephants and Sweepstakes awe us - and in items like Button holes, we get bunkered, yet let us write about CYCLES, GRAMOPHONES and RADIO'.⁹¹ The Dadaists also play with advertising: mixing real adverts with elements that are false to mislead and entertain readers. Tzara wrote that 'Dada is the signboard of abstraction' and Kurt Schwitters turned to commercial typography and advertising design when

⁸⁶ John Heartfield, 'Wer ist der Schönste?', *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*, 1 (15 January 1919), front cover.

⁸⁷ Timothy Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986; repr. 1987), pp. 113, 116.

⁸⁸ Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, trans. by Sharmila Ganguly (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 27.

⁸⁹ Benson, p. 168.

⁹⁰ *Thom's Dublin Street Directory: City, County & Bray* (1969), p. 812.

⁹¹ *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), back matter.

he set up the successful *Merz-Werbezentrale* agency in 1924.⁹² Similarly, in *Der Dada 2* there is ‘an advertisement for *DadaCo*, the anthology of Dadaist art and writing that was to be published by Kurt Wolff in Munich, but which ultimately never appeared’; this advert also lists Huelsenbeck’s own address in Berlin as the putative ‘Centralamt des dadaismus’ and the next page mixes pseudo-facts with fiction by inviting readers to join ‘Club Dada’ and gain access to the ‘club’s various institutes and departments, including its graphological institute, medical department, detective agency, advertising department and central bureau for male and female welfare’.⁹³

1.4. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that *Blather* both adopts the model of its immediate inspiration *Razze* and subverts it: developing its humour in a direction that clearly resonates with specific techniques found in Berlin Dada. If *Razze* is the more obvious context for *Blather* to have been largely neglected, then Dada is the less obvious yet perhaps the more important. Invariably Dada magazines like *Der Dada* are launched with great fanfare but evaporate after a few issues. Likewise, the approach taken by *Blather*, with its pseudo-earnest attempt to engage and subvert mass culture in the same movement, does not win a lasting readership. But this represents only a temporary cessation of hostilities. The beginning of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in the *Irish Times* in October 1940 enables O’Nolan and his collaborators to continue their satirical experiment in blending mass-market entertainment with strategies more closely resembling an avant-garde praxis; this time for a quarter of a century. Achieving a notoriety in the Dublin of the 1940s on a par with the Dadaists in Berlin or Paris two decades earlier, the column expands the audience for O’Nolan’s antics from dozens or perhaps a few hundred to many thousands of readers.⁹⁴ Taaffe concludes her essay on O’Nolan, *Blather* and popular culture by suggesting that O’Nolan’s

instinct to orientate himself towards the daily press rather than the world of the limited edition would place him in a unique position in Ireland as a writer

⁹² Tzara, p. 140; John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985) p. 187.

⁹³ Biro, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Mark O’Brien estimates circulation of 25,500 in the 1930s in *The Irish Times: A History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), p. 82.

of modernist credentials who, for nearly three decades, addressed a wide and responsive readership.⁹⁵

Taaffe argues that the growth of O’Nolan’s posthumous reputation as the novelist Flann O’Brien has entailed a concomitant lack of consideration for ‘his turn to journalism [...] as a choice in its own right’. Even if, as she acknowledges, the *Irish Times* was the journal of ‘a social and intellectual minority’, the significant impulse in O’Nolan’s literary career is towards larger audiences, influence, celebrity and the financial success that this might offer (even if it did not arrive).⁹⁶ O’Nolan’s orientation towards the popular seems to contradict the more conventionally modernist way (according to dominant critical constructions) that his writing revels in its self-referential and labyrinthine formal complexity. This contradiction is evident in *Blather*: a publication which is both determined to entertain readers and serve its advertisers as well as subvert the discourses of popular culture and destabilize audience expectations. The contexts examined in this chapter are instructive in this regard. *Razzele* reveals that the satirical metaleptic formal experimentation we have come to associate with the modernism or the nascent post-modernism of the O’Nolan circle at UCD is already part of the apparatus of an established London comic periodical. Elsewhere, Berlin Dada provides an example of an avowedly avant-garde grouping who, in pursuit of the attention of a mass audience, package their radical aesthetic and political programme in the form of entertaining magazines and public spectacles. *Blather* adopts a related strategy: gathering energy from the dynamics of popular entertainment in order to stage its intervention into the print culture and cultural politics of the Irish Free State.

⁹⁵ Taaffe, ‘Brian O’Nolan, *Blather* and Popular Culture’, p. 33.

⁹⁶ Taaffe, ‘Brian O’Nolan, *Blather* and Popular Culture’, p. 24.

Chapter 2 - ‘sprakin sea Djoytsch?’: O’Nolan’s *Bhark I bPrágrais*

2.1. Introduction

transition and its ‘Revolution of the Word’ not only ensure that the O’Nolan circle are familiar with Dadaist and Surrealist writing, the magazine’s publication of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* fragments also poses the intimidating question: ‘sprakin sea Djoytsch?’.¹ It is perhaps some version of this question which explains why, squeezed into spare pages of the February 1938 edition of *Ireland To-day* and printed in a smaller font than the rest of the journal, there is a short and strange piece of writing. It consists of 700 words of dense medieval Irish and Latin prose, features some very unusual orthography and is sprinkled with references to Pangur Bán, James Joyce, Shem and Shaun. The vignette is titled ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ [A little bit by Parnabas] and subtitled as an ‘Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais le Briain O Nuallain’ [An Extract from Work in Progress by Briain O Nuallain]. This unusual feature is described extravagantly in the ‘Notes on Our Contributors’ section as follows: ‘BRIAN Ó NUALLÁIN contributes an extract from his revolutionary *Work in Progress*; considers it idle to deny its affinity with the work of another eminent Irish author, now resident in the French capital’.² The subtitle and framing material advertises ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ as an engagement with Joyce’s avant-garde experimentations in multilingual puns and neologisms in *Work in Progress* (later *Finnegans Wake*), which is serialized from 1924 in European literary magazines and journals such as *Transatlantic Review* and *Le Navire d'Argent*, with the majority published by the Paris-based journal *transition*.³ Joyce cultivates a network of proponents and imitators including Niall Montgomery. In the April 1938 issue of *transition* Joyce publishes the Book 2, Chapter 3 episode of *Work in Progress* which

¹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 485. ‘sprakin sea Djoytsch?’ is also the title of an essay about *Finnegans Wake* in the *Irish Times*, 26 April 1947, p. 7, by Andrew Cass [John Garvin] in which he emphasizes the text’s ‘Local Habitation’.

² Brian Ó Nualláin, ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabas’, *Ireland To-day*, 3.2 (February 1938), 138, 165, inside front cover. Republished in *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 51–52.

³ See ‘Appendix 2: Publication History of *Work in Progress*/*Finnegans Wake*’ in Luca Crispi and Sam Slote, *How Joyce wrote ‘Finnegans Wake’: A Chapter-by-chapter Genetic Guide* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 490–94, and Dirk van Hulle, *James Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’: Pre-Book Publications of Finnegan’s Wake* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

features the television comedians ‘Butt’ and ‘Taff’.⁴ In the same issue, Montgomery publishes ‘Swing Tides of March This Time Darling’, a jazz-inspired vignette about a radio show: “‘Hypo’ Chondria and his Nervous Breakdown Gang bringing you a program of sweat music from the hanging gardens of Social-Contact-Club through the courtesy of Wanamaker – the new thirty-billion Private Relations Corporation’.”⁵

‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ had first been published as the third of three experimental vignettes in the *National Student* in June, July and December 1935. Niall Sheridan recalls these texts as ‘short fiction pieces dealing with contemporary life, a sort of Dublin *Decameron*’ but written in ‘Old Irish’.⁶ However, the version which is the subject of this chapter is submitted again to *Ireland To-day* by O’Nolan in January 1938 with a new title and accompanied by a letter addressed to Books Section Editor, Edward Sheehy, claiming it is part of a larger composition which

will be the absolute works as far as the Irish language is concerned – a lengthy document comprising every known & unknown dialect of Irish, including middle-Irish, altirisch, bog-Irish, Bearlachas, civil service Irish, future Irish, my own Irish and every Irish. Accordingly it is labelled ‘Extractum Ó Bhark i bPrágrais’.⁷

Whilst *Ireland To-day* is not an avant-garde publication akin to *transition*, it is a left-wing and outward-looking little magazine and an important publication venue for O’Nolan’s circle at this point. Appearing between 1936 and 1938, the periodical is described by Frank Shovlin as a ‘concerted attempt by Irish artists to fight against the increasing introversion and chauvinism of the Free State’.⁸ Nicholas Allen dedicates a chapter of *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War* to the journal and, noting the support it receives from the Republican leader and writer, Ernie O’Malley (publishing an excerpt from his forthcoming *On Another Man’s Wound* in 1936), describes the journal

⁴ James Joyce, ‘Fragment from “Work in Progress”’, *transition*, 27 (April-May 1938), 59–78.

⁵ Niall Montgomery, ‘Swing Tides of March This Time Darling’, *transition*, 27 (April-May 1938), 110–113 (p. 113).

⁶ For the publication history see Ó Conaire, p. 5; for the anecdote, see Niall Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ in Timothy O’Keeffe (ed.), *Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan* (London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe, 1973), pp. 36–37.

⁷ Letter to Edward Sheehy, 16 January 1938, qtd. in Cronin, p. 55.

⁸ Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923–1958* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), p. 69.

as the ‘voice of an aspirational, sometimes contradictory, intellectual revolution that had grown from the traditions of physical force’ which, emblazoned with a Fenian phoenix on its front cover, ‘marked itself as a point of renewal, a call to arms once more’.⁹ Half of *Ireland To-day*’s pages are taken up by essays debating politics and economics, which generally put forward republican and left-wing positions. The other half of a standard issue is made up of short sections on Art, Music, Theatre, Film and a substantial ‘Book’ section. Aesthetically, the journal reflects both the influence of the Cork realists who contribute to it, such as Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O’Connor, and the reviewers in O’Nolan’s circle like Denis Devlin, A. J. Leventhal and Niall Sheridan, who are sympathetic to modernism and international avant-garde movements. For example, *Ireland To-day* publishes articles about writers including Franz Kafka (as discussed in chapter four), Luigi Pirandello and William Saroyan.¹⁰ The journal also prints new poems and short stories including work by women writers such as Ethna McCarthy and Eileen Brennan, along with modernist verse in English and Irish by poets in the O’Nolan circle, including Charles Donnelly, Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, Niall Montgomery and Blanaid Salkeld.¹¹ Allen suggests that, particularly through its ‘fellowship’ with ‘three emerging poets, Denis Devlin, Blanaid Salkeld and Brian Coffee [...] in *Ireland To-day* republicans opened a space for literary modernisms’.¹² The February 1938 issue where ‘Pisa Bec’ appears also features reviews by Sheridan and Leventhal, who publishes a bold defence of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in

⁹ Allen, *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War*, p. 179 (citing O’Malley as published in *Ireland To-day*, 1.4 (September 1936, p. 39), pp. 171–72.

¹⁰ For example, A. J. Leventhal’s review of *Pirandello* by Walter Starkie; Niall Sheridan’s review of ‘The Metamorphosis’ by Franz Kafka and *The Gay and Melancholy Flux* by William Saroyan, *Ireland To-day*, 2.6 (June 1937), 79, 89–90, and Sheridan’s review of *The Bridge* by Francis Stuart and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, *Ireland To-day*, 2.9 (September 1937), 85–86.

¹¹ For example: Ethna McCarthy, ‘Flight’, *Ireland To-day*, 1.1 (January 1937), 52; Eileen Brennan, ‘Winds of the World’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.8 (August 1937), 48; Charles Donnelly, ‘Poem’, and Brian Coffey, ‘The Navigator’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.1 (January 1937), 48, 49; Dennis Devlin, ‘Death and Her Beasts’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.5 (May 1937), 34; Brian Coffey, ‘Antiochus Got an Ague’, Niall Montgomery, ‘Westwego’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.9 (September 1937), 40, 56 and ‘Adharca Fiadhaigh’ *Ireland To-day*, 2.12 (December 1937), 56; and Blanaid Salkeld, ‘Away’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.12 (December 1937), 36.

¹² Allen, *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War*, p. 186.

1923, together with an essay about the dangers of fascism for Ireland by Cecil ffrench Salkeld.¹³

Critical accounts of the *Ireland To-day* vignette first appear in the early period of O'Nolan criticism. His biographers, Anthony Cronin, Peter Costello and Peter Van de Kamp, make brief remarks on 'Pisa Bec oc Parnabus'. In 1987, Costello and Van de Kamp focus on O'Nolan's circumstances and financial motivations for selling copy to little magazines rather than the text in its own right. They describe it as 'an article in Irish, an extract from a student novel' which was one of the pieces he 'had to hand' when he needed 'to add to his salary by writing'.¹⁴ In his account in 1989 Cronin cites the letter to Sheehy quoted above and describes 'Pisa Bec oc Parnabus' as a 'quirky piece, full of puns and written in a language which owes more to Joyce than it does to Old or Middle Irish', appearing to discount what O'Nolan claims about the text including 'middle-Irish and altirisch'.¹⁵ Breandán Ó Conaire comments more extensively on these parodies in *Myles na Gaeilge* (1986), where he gives an account of one medieval Irish vignette published in *Comhthrom Féinne* in 1933 and the aforementioned trio in June, July and December 1935 in the *National Student*. Ó Conaire writes:

Around this time he published little stories that were unusual, completely *sui generis*. They were uncommon in two ways: (a) in terms of revealing his imaginative capacity and (b) in terms of the linguistic ability to express it. They are concerned, in terms of content, with drunken rambling and revelling. The first one, 'The Graduates' Adventures and Travels' was published in [...] January 1933.¹⁶

¹³ A. J. Leventhal, Niall Sheridan and others, 'Book Section', *Ireland To-day*, 3.2 (February 1938), 171–87 and Cecil ffrench Salkeld, 'Democracy at Bay', *Ireland To-day*, 3.2 (February 1938), 123–29. For the *Ulysses* review, see Lawrence K. Emery [A. J. Leventhal], 'The *Ulysses* of Mr. James Joyce', *The Klaxon*, 1 (Winter 1923), 14–20.

¹⁴ Costello, p. 61.

¹⁵ Cronin, p. 55.

¹⁶ Original: 'Timpeall an ama seo cheap sé glac beag scéalta a bhí neamhghnách, sui generis amach is amach. Bhíodar neamhchoitianta ar dhá shlí: (a) ó thaobh na n-achmhainní samhlaíochta a nochtadar agus (b) ó thaobh an chumais teanga a léiríodar. Bhaineadar, ó thaobh ábhair de, le hólachan agus ragairne. An chéad cheann díobh, 'Echtri agus Imtheactai' na nGraduati' foilsíodh [...] i mí Eanáir 1933 é'. (Ó Conaire, p. 4, my translation)

Ó Conaire refers to how the primary satirical manoeuvre of these vignettes is to ironically address conservative worries that Old and Middle Irish texts contain violent and sexualized subject matter which is inappropriate for modern Catholic readers. He cites the preface given to the first vignette (which narrates an outrageous drinking spree surrounding the awarding of degrees by UCD on 5 November 1571), in which the editor reassuringly tells readers:

In editing and publishing this old tale for the first time, the Editor trusts that it will supply a long-felt want. It has long been apparent that Editors of old and middle Irish texts are largely devoid of moral values and do not hesitate to incorporate in their respective editions unsavoury accounts of certain eccentricities of the medieval and primitive Irish character. ‘I have been worried to death’, writes a correspondent from Ballymore-Eustace, ‘in hiding my edition of the Táin and of the Speckled Book of Durrow from my youngest son, who is just two years and chastising him when I find him reading the well-known tenth-century Greek commentary on the Mayo ogham-stones.’ This, we think, is a dreadful state of affairs...¹⁷

Sheridan describes the vignettes as the result of a request he made of O’Nolan ‘to write a series of short fiction pieces dealing with contemporary life, a sort of Dublin Decameron’, to which O’Nolan agreed ‘but only on condition he could write in Old Irish’, readable solely by the scholars Osborn Bergin, D. A. Binchy and Richard Best.¹⁸ However, there ‘were ominous rumblings after the first instalment appeared. Brian had apparently outdone Rabelais and the Three Wise Men, greatly tickled by the bawdy humour, could not resist retelling the choicest episodes to some of their colleagues’.¹⁹ As editor of the magazine at the time, Sheridan is called to answer for the ‘obscene’ subject matter to the President of the College, Denis Coffey, but is saved because ‘[he], too, was completely ignorant of Old Irish’.²⁰ Whether or not the anecdote is true, Sheridan’s account shows how with these exercises the O’Nolan

¹⁷ Qtd. in Ó Conaire, p. 5.

¹⁸ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, pp. 36–37.

¹⁹ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, p. 37.

²⁰ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, p. 37.

circle are testing the limits of the myth of the Free State's culture as, in Gibbons's words, the manifestation 'of a homogenous, continuous nation [...] handed down in tablets of stone from a prehistoric past'; rather than, they implicitly suggest, a continuous process of cultural production whose 'strength' lies in its ability to appropriate 'the forms and products of the metropolitan centre for its own ends'.²¹

As this chapter shows through its investigation of 'Pisa Bec', these texts do not only reconstruct a replica of medieval Irish, but accomplish a re-appropriation of modernist strategies for the native tradition. In Ó Conaire's words, the 'Irish itself was a bit strange. It was a "middle-aged" Gaelic "*pot pourri*" of linguistic materials drawn from Middle Irish and Classical Irish, half fact and half invented, and including Latin, English and French terms with modern Irish mixed in'.²² Ó Conaire also locates two comments about these texts in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The first is Myles's reference to having 'published several discourses in Middle Irish' when remarking on the death of Osborn Bergin in 1950 (*CL*, 11 October 1950, p. 6). In 1960, Myles reports his discovery of the June 1935 issue of the *National Student*, but declines to reprint his piece because it is 'in Early Middle Irish, and of my kind not many now exist to understand a word of it' (*CL*, 31 March 1960, p. 8). Taaffe comments on the *Ireland To-day* vignette in *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass* (2008), describing it as the completion of O'Nolan's 'satire of all branches of the Irish literary scene' and noting its 'Wakean muddle of Middle Irish and Latin'.²³ In 2011, Ó Conaire returns to this topic to discuss the relevance of Joyce's *Work in Progress* to the stories, which he describes as using language which is both 'avant-garde' and rooted in the medieval tradition.²⁴ Ó Conaire also mentions the 'unique "medieval" Irish' of these extracts and its 'similarities with the surrealist *Finnegans Wake* segments which appeared in literary magazines' in a chapter of a 2014 collection.²⁵

²¹ Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, pp. 81, 80.

²² Original: 'an Ghaeilge féin ann pas beag aisteach. Cinéal Gaeilge mire 'meánaoisí' ba ea í, pot pourri de'fhoirmeacha, idir fhíor agus bhréige, ón Meán-Ghaeilge agus ón nGaeilge Chlasaiceach a raibh téarmaí Laidine, Bearla, Fraincise agus Nua-Ghaeilge measchtha thríothu'. (Ó Conaire, p. 5, my translation)

²³ Taaffe, pp. 15, 44.

²⁴ Breandán Ó Conaire, 'Ó Nualláin, na Scéalta "Meán-Ghaeilge" & Sem Seoighe', *Combar*, 71.12 (Nollaig 2011), 35–36 (p. 33).

²⁵ Breandán Ó Conaire, 'At Swim-Two-Birds: Sweeny & Many Others' in John Carey (ed.), *Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 2014), pp. 130–71 (p. 135).

This chapter builds on Ó Conaire's remarks by conducting a closer analysis of the 'Pisa Bec oc Parnabus' vignette, its contexts, sources and stylistics. The chapter focuses on this vignette specifically because it is the text that O'Nolan chooses to republish with the new subtitle of 'Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais le Briain O Nuallain', thus explicitly gesturing towards Joyce's *Work in Progress* and signalling its intention to respond in an Irish magazine. This chapter's interpretation positions the text as a striking example of O'Nolan's multilingual output in the 1930s which casts greater light on both his insistence on the compatibility between avant-garde montage aesthetics and medieval Irish literary practices, and his use of the mob and mob violence as figures for metaleptic linguistic encounters staged between obscure specialist texts and the wider reading marketplace. This chapter's close focus on the text's deployment of hybridized language, its extensive intertextual references and its likely satirical targets suggests that O'Nolan's pastiche is both an assembly of obscure Irish words and a depiction of a violent, drunken brawl in Grogan's Pub on Leeson Street in which Barnabas, his maid Fanny and Pangur Bán are ranged against Shem, Seán and the massed, indeterminate identities of *Work in Progress*. As such, 'Pisa Bec oc Parnabus' is both a performance which engages with the cultural politics of language revival and an example of, in Stephen Ablitt's words, the 'ironic modernism' which characterizes O'Nolan's cure for what Joseph Brooker describes as his 'Joycean hangover'.²⁶

2.2. Irish modernization and hybridization

This chapter argues that 'Pisa Bec oc Parnabus' satirizes the essentialist tendency of the Irish language revival movement at the same time as replying not just to *Work in Progress* but also to readers who suggested that Joyce's undertaking represented a parallel development to the language revival. In adopting this approach, the chapter is a beneficiary of the growing body of critical literature which has contextualized O'Nolan's Irish-language work in reference to the political and cultural developments of its time, and which has sought to develop a critical vocabulary which is better-equipped to integrate theoretical readings of O'Nolan's Irish-language work with the

²⁶ Stephen Ablitt, "'The Ghost of Poor Jimmy Joyce': A Portrait of the Artist as a Reluctant Modernist", in Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald and Sascha Morrell (eds), *Flann O'Brien & Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), pp. 55–66 (p. 65); Joseph Brooker, *Joyce's Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 200.

more established body of criticism concerning his English-language writing. In recent years, the *Parish Review* has published new work along these lines by Brian Ó Conchubhair, Gregory Darwin, Jack Fennell, Joseph LaBine, Radvan Markus and Jonathan Ó Néill.²⁷ Elsewhere, Richard Murphy has repositioned *An Béal Bocht* as ‘a radically nativist minor literature’.²⁸ The claims that this chapter makes for O’Nolan’s close attention to medieval Irish texts are also informed by a more established critical discussion of the incorporation of themes, characters and motifs from this tradition which begins with work by Ewa Wäppling, Ó Conaire, Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin and Cathal G. Ó hÁinle and has been revived in more recent work by Adrian Naughton, Louis de Paor and Ó Conaire.²⁹

The translation and close reading of particular texts has emerged as a key method by which to shed more light on O’Nolan’s complex interventions into the cultural debates of his period and to make his Irish-language work more accessible to

²⁷ Brian Ó Conchubhair, ‘The Bildung Subject and Modernist Autobiography in *An Béal Bocht* (Beyond *An tOileánach*)’, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 39–50; Gregory Darwin, ‘As ucht a bhochtanaís Ghaeiligh’: Parody, Poverty, and the Politics of Irish Folklore in *An Béal Bocht*, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 17–28; Jack Fennell, ‘Lost in Flannslation: Reading and Translating the Early Work of Brian Ó Nualláin’, *Parish Review*, 1.2 (Winter 2013), 43–50; Joseph LaBine, “‘the words I taught to him’: Interfusional Language Play and Brian Ó Nualláin’s ‘Revenge on the English’”, *Parish Review*, 3.2 (Spring 2016), 26–38; Radvan Markus, ‘The Prison of Language: Brian O’Nolan, *An Béal Bocht*, and Language Determinism’, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 29–38; Jonathan Ó Néill, “‘Erse-atz” and “Gaelassenheit”: What Can we Learn from Ó Nualláin’s use of Irish?”, *Parish Review*, 2.1 (Fall 2013), 10–15.

²⁸ Richard T. Murphy, ‘Flann O’Brien, minor literature and the modern Gaelic canon’, in Jennika Baines (ed.), *Is It About a Bicycle?: Flann O’Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), pp. 67–82.

²⁹ Eva Wäppling, *Four Irish Legendary Figures in ‘At Swim-Two-Birds’: A Study of Flann O’Brien’s Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy* (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1984); Ó Conaire; Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin, ‘Comparatively Untapped Sources’ in Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (eds) *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O’Brien* (Belfast: Queen’s University Press, 1997), pp. 9–16; Cathal G. Ó hÁinle, ‘Fionn and Suibhne in *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ in Clune and Hurson (eds) *Conjuring Complexities*, pp. 17–36; Adrian Naughton, ‘Nádúir-Philíocht na Gaedhilge and Flann O’Brien’s Fiction’, in Baines (ed.), *Is it about a bicycle*, pp. 83–97; Adrian Naughton, “‘More of your fancy kiss-my-hand’: A Further Note on Flann O’Brien’s Nádúir-Philíocht na Gaedhilge’. *Parish Review*, 1.2 (Winter 2013), 15–30; Louis de Paor, “‘a scholar manqué?’: further notes on Brian Ó Nualláin’s engagement with Early Irish Literature’ in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 189–203; Breandán Ó Conaire, ‘Brian Ó Nualláin/O’Nolan: Scholarly Background and Foreground’, *Parish Review*, 4.1, (Spring 2018), 4–16.

an Anglophone critical audience. The recent work from which this chapter borrows that model and its critical tools includes Jack Fennell's discussion of the difficulties of translating O'Nolan, Catherine Flynn's analysis of *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s engagement with Japanese geopolitics through the medium of Irish, Maria Kager's application of bilingual cognition theory to O'Nolan and Joseph LaBine's characterization of O'Nolan's Irish-language short stories and newspaper columns as 'interfusional'.³⁰ These studies help to demonstrate that the instability endemic to the Irish language itself during the early decades of the twentieth century is the satirical territory of O'Nolan's Irish writings. Flynn, for example, examines a sequence of Irish *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns which, with 'a strategy of half-saying which allows a series of overlapping identifications [...] displays the polyvalent power of the traditional Irish language while undermining any identity associated with it'.³¹ The important context for O'Nolan's use of Irish in this particular way is a language revival and modernization strategy which remained problematically tied to conservative notions of the national identity. Fennell explains that many of the 'challenges' of translating O'Nolan's Irish 'are accounted for by the history of the language revival movement through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. During this period, commentators argued that:

if the Irish language was to be respected as a working language, and not just a form of rural cant, it had to prove itself capable of engaging with the modern world. Once this was implemented as a policy, however, there remained the question of vocabulary and terminology. The language simply did not have the vocabulary to deal with the various developments in science, art and politics that had arisen between its near-eradication and the Gaelic Revival.³²

³⁰ Catherine Flynn, "'the half-said thing': *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Japan and the Second World War' in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 71–86; Maria Kager, 'Lambd láftar and bad language: bilingual cognition in *Cruiskeen Lawn*' in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 54–70; LaBine, 'the words I taught to him', p. 32.

³¹ Flynn, pp. 85–86.

³² Fennell, pp. 44, 46.

Many other problems and disagreements beset the revival of Irish, including making choices between different alphabets, dialects and historical periods of the language. Negotiating the opposing strategies of borrowing foreign words and reviving old ones, Pádraig Ó Dálaigh told a 1922 meeting of the Irish-language organisation, *An Fáiinne*, that:

Irish is now going through the mill of this new world, and it must be arranged and adjusted so that it will be suited and appropriate for every necessity with regard to the affairs of today's world [...] Old words will have to be sought out and new words invented or stolen; all the dialects must be mixed together as would be done with milk in a vat, and, after a while, the cream taken from them and the churning done, and after turning and mixing them well, taking the butter to ourselves as the language of all Ireland.³³

As was the case with the literary revival, language modernization required a fresh encounter with pre-modern linguistic traditions. Officials had to search through different texts and dialects to season foreign borrowings with a native flavour. This modernization process, when taken under the wing of the state, was initially managed by *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* (The Terminology Committee). This committee was established by the Free State in 1928 to publish 'vocabulary lists related to the sciences, the arts, commerce and recreation'.³⁴ Through the resulting *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (The Official Standard), Irish was re-established as an artificial language; regularized and re-cut from the available materials, with the gaps filled in.

The decolonization process had in fact led *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* to embark on a modern reiteration of the founding myth of Irish: a tale told by seventh-century

³³ Original: 'Anois tá an Ghaedhilg ag dul tré mhuilleann an tsaoghail nua seo, agus caithfear í do léiriú agus do réidhteacht go cothrom, oireamhnach i gcóir gach riachtanais a bhaineann le cúrsaí soaghail an lae indíú [...] Caithfear sean-fhocail do chuardach, agus focail nua do cheapadh nó do ghoid; caithfear na canúintí go léir do mheasgadh mar do dhéanafaí le bainne i ndabhach, agus, i gceann tamaill, an t-uachdar do bhaint díobh, agus an cuigeann do dhéanamh, agus, tréis iad a chasadh agus a shuathadh go maith, an t-im a ghabháil chughainn mar theanga na hÉireann uile'. Translated by Philip O'Leary in *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), pp. 170, 581.

³⁴ Fennell, p. 46.

grammarians about the invention of the language, the *Auraicept Na nÉces* (*A Poet's Primer*), in which Irish is 'do-reped' (cut out) of the fragments of language left in the wake of the fall of Babel and assembled by the Scythian scholar Fénius Farsaid into a new language.³⁵ There is no direct evidence that O'Nolan read this text, which survives in *The Book of Leinster* or *The Book of Ballymote*, in George Calder's 1917 edition.³⁶ However, it seems unlikely O'Nolan wasn't aware of it; the Auracept text is canonical and one of the main sources for the Ogham alphabet. Ogham is mentioned in his article for *Combthrom Féinne*, 'The "L&H" from earliest times', which, claiming to republish society minutes from 'the latter part of the Stone Age' in appropriately modernized and censored language, apologizes for parts of the original that are 'illegible, owing to the vandalism of Erse writers several centuries later, who covered the granite Minute-stones with crude "Ogham" notchings'.³⁷ This is how the Auracept describes the formation of Irish:

Fénius Farsaid invented it at Nimrod's tower at the end of ten years after the dispersion from the tower [...] the school asked him to extract a language out of the many languages such that they only would speak it or anyone who might learn it from them. It is there that the language was cut out of the many languages and it was assigned to one of them [...] It is there then that this language was given its rules: what was best then of every language and what was widest and finest was cut out into Irish.³⁸

³⁵ Anders Ahlqvist, *The Early Irish Linguist: An Edition of the Canonical Part of the Auraicept Na N-éces with Introduction, Commentary, and Indices* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1983), pp. 47–48.

³⁶ George Calder, *Auraicept na n-éces: the scholars' primer; being the texts of the Ogham tract from the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow book of Lecan, and the text of the Trefhocul from the Book of Leinster* (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1917).

³⁷ Brother Barnabas, 'The "L&H" from earliest times', *Combthrom Féinne* 1.1 (May 1931), repr. in MBM, pp. 21–22.

³⁸ Original: 'ar-a-ráinic Fénius Farsaid ocin tur Nemruaid cinn deich mbliadnae iar scailiud ón tur [...] and-sin con-atgetar cuici in scol bérla do thepiu dóib asna ilbérlaib acht combad leo a n-óenur no-beth no la nech fo-glennad leo. Is and-sin do-reped a mbérla asna ilbérlaib 7 do-aiselbad do óen díb [...]. Is and iarum ro-riaglad a mbérla-sa: a mba ferr iarum do cach bérlu 7 a mba leithiu 7 a mba cáimiu, is ed do-reped isin nGoídilc'. (Ahlqvist, pp. 47–48)

The text is one of the earliest vernacular grammars in Western Europe and, significantly, the first to favourably contrast a vernacular with the classical languages of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. It is notable that, in the *Auraceipt*, the newly invented Irish derives its superiority from the hybridity of its components: ‘what was best then of every language [...] was cut out into Irish’. This account may reflect the tradition, discussed in chapter six, of the ceremonial use of ‘*bérta na filed*’ (poetic language), a synthetic language which combines Irish with Greek, Hebrew and Latin. During the modern reconstruction of Irish, many of the borrowings, inventions and reclamations also involved central notions of the national subject and its relationship to the outside world. For example, Alan Bliss details how ‘de Valera had to concede to Lloyd George [that] the Irish people had never had a word for “republic”. Two new words were invented, *saorstát* and *poblacht*, and for a time they were in rivalry’.³⁹

O’Nolan is hence drawing on an older tradition when he rejects essentialist approaches which seek to preserve the purity of the Irish language. The alternative is a radical embrace of heterogeneity: LaBine significantly advances criticism in this area when he suggests that O’Nolan’s way of writing in Irish contains an implicit proposal for ‘a hybrid literary mode wherein arises a new direction for Irish literary expression, both written and oral’.⁴⁰ LaBine argues that O’Nolan’s Irish in *Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*, the Irish columns in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and O’Nolan’s Irish-language fiction more generally can be characterized as ‘interfusional’; that is, these texts ‘share a common theme wherein O’Nolan satirises Ireland’s language debate by employing hybridized language and projecting either the growth or destruction of Gaelic within the comic arc of satire’.⁴¹ O’Nolan exhibits a translation-confounding propensity to play with transliteration, typography, orthography and syntax in order to write in both English and Irish at the same time, ‘to synthesise or hybridise colonial and colonised modes of communication’; this strategy ‘satirically implicates Ireland in her failure to hybridise colonised modes of communication that will eventually lead to the loss of language and culture’.⁴² O’Nolan’s ‘interfusional’ approach is often instantiated at the level of a single word or phrase which carries meanings in several languages through its phonic and orthographic surfaces. In an essay dealing with the

³⁹ Alan Bliss, ‘The Standardization of Irish’, *The Crane Bag*, 5.2 (1981), 76–82 (p 78).

⁴⁰ LaBine, p. 38.

⁴¹ LaBine, p. 26

⁴² LaBine, p. 32.

advantages of O’Nolan’s English / Irish bilingualism for this practice, Kager discusses how these ‘hybrid “English/Irish strings”’ of text occur in the middle of an otherwise Irish-language narrative, resulting in a hilarious simultaneity of contrasting languages’.⁴³ As if to prepare readers for its more complex instances of hybridity, ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ begins with two instances of a hybrid string, where the contrast between phonic and orthographic levels leads to potentially conflicting interpretations. Its subtitle, ‘Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais’, advertises an occasion in which the correctly pronounced Irish is a near homophone for the ‘Extract from a Work in Progress’ subtitle used by Joyce, even if its orthographic appearance could mislead a reader who is ignorant of Irish. After the epigraph, the phrase ‘Fanny ancilla’ is a compound of an English name and a Latin term for a female servant which, if read using Irish pronunciation, would sound similar to ‘Fanny Hill’, the protagonist of a pornographic eighteenth-century novel by John Cleland.⁴⁴

Throughout, the construction of ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ supports LaBine’s ‘interfusional’ hypothesis as well as Ó Conaire’s attestation of its medieval sources. More than half of its words are archaic and, largely, the grammar follows the distinctive verb-forms of Old or Middle Irish conventions, as opposed to the simpler requirements of modern Irish. Its assortment of lexical challenges includes the unusual reproduction of scribal abbreviations and contractions usually expanded in print, the reproduction of unusual morphological occurrences (difficult declined pronouns like ‘arm’, for example), strange spellings incorporating non-native letters which appear at first glance to be neologisms (like ‘fwiskis’ for *uisce*) and the interpolation of Greek and Latin phrases. Despite all this, in what seems like a knowing ruse, O’Nolan’s letter to Sheehy promisingly describes the text as ‘intelligible to anyone with a competent knowledge of Irish, as the Civil Service Commissioners say’.⁴⁵ The extent to which this claim is true would depend on how one defines ‘competent’: certainly much of it would be well beyond someone who had started learning Irish, say, to advance a career in the Civil Service.

‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ is not simply a re-animation of fragments of medieval manuscripts but a web of interacting textual practices which is rooted in the Irish

⁴³ Kager, p. 64.

⁴⁴ John Cleland, *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Women of Pleasure* (London: Penguin, 1985). Thank-you to Joseph LaBine for suggesting this connection.

⁴⁵ Qtd. in Cronin, p. 55.

language and yet still insistently hybridized. Throughout, English and Irish phonology is used interchangeably to create a jarring sense of hybridity within words: when one of the protagonists, Barnabas, requests that the inn-keeper, Grogan, does not share out the drink ‘for feruip Éirenn’ (with the men of Ireland), the rightful ‘b’ in ‘feruib’ is swapped for a ‘p’. In English, ‘b’ and ‘p’ are usually interchangeable, but in Old Irish the ‘p’ swap would mean (in most cases) replacing the fricative sound of ‘b’ in this position with a plosive and thus attenuating or even undermining the word’s meaning. The result is that the ‘men’ of Ireland are reduced to a ghost word that is reported to occur only once, perhaps erroneously, in a 1908 compendium.⁴⁶ The repeated insertion of non-native letters like ‘j’, ‘k’, ‘w’ and ‘q’ creates the impression of a text that, in contrast to *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* and its artificially naturalized loan words, is deliberately denaturalized: its foreign elements unwind the Irish meanings rather than augment them.

Another vector of transformation and collision in ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ is the way that O’Nolan pastiches the multiplicity and mutation of character names within *Work in Progress*. It seems clear that the main protagonist is O’Nolan’s student persona, Brother Barnabas. However, this proper name is subjected to a bewildering sequence of transformations within the text: Barnapi, Barnabos, Barnabas, Barn, Parnabas, barnabs, Barnabas, Barnapos, Parnus bán, Barnajus, Parn, and finally, the extremely non-native Quarnapois. One notices in this list that Barnabas starts to slide into Pangur Bán as the distinction between two of the main characters becomes unclear. Even Fanny, nearly every time she speaks, is obliged to clarify that the speaker is ‘meisi .i. fanny’ (myself, that is, Fanny) because ‘meisi’ can be used to indicate either the first or third person.

The vignette’s use of medieval language fits with Sheridan’s joke that O’Nolan ‘would be addressing an audience of only three, presumably that celebrated trio of scholars, Osborn Bergin, D. A. Binchy and Richard Best’.⁴⁷ However, its more experimental characteristics indicate O’Nolan’s awareness that to target such a tiny and specialized audience also reflects the practices of high modernism. Barry McCrea, in his discussion of the Irish poet Séan Ó Riordáin, points out that using

⁴⁶ The only instance of ‘feruip’ has been attributed to Osborn Bergin, R. I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J. G. O’Keeffe (eds), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, 5 vols. (Halle and Dublin, 1908), II, p. 55 according to the *Electronic Irish Dictionary of the Irish Language*, <<http://www.dil.ie/39641>> [accessed 27 July 2016].

⁴⁷ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, pp. 32–53 (pp. 36–37).

difficult Irish dialects as a form of private language resembles the intimidating reading requirements of works by Joyce or T.S. Eliot: ‘the audience is in some respects not merely small, it is non-existent; modern poetry in Irish is, like *Finnegans Wake* or “The Waste Land,” addressed to an ideal hypothesis of a reader that cannot exist in the real world’.⁴⁸ As Ó Conaire suggests, O’Nolan’s hybridizing and ‘interfusional’ method of writing in medieval Irish can ably be compared to the experimentation which characterizes the avant-garde heights of Joycean modernism, presenting this chapter with an opportunity to situate his *Bhark I bPrágrais* as a syncretic parody which responds not just to the language revival debate, but also to the critical debate around the work it simultaneously responds to: James Joyce’s *Work in Progress*.

2.3. *Bhark I bPrágrais* vs. *Work in Progress*

Drawing a parallel between Joyce’s *Work in Progress* and the Irish language revival is not O’Nolan’s invention. It is part of the reaction by more mainstream reviewers to two episodes from *Work in Progress* when, after appearing first in modernist little magazines, they are published as short books: *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (1928) and *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies: A Fragment from Work in Progress* (1934).⁴⁹ In a review of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* for the *Times Literary Supplement* published in 1928, an anonymous writer describes the book as ‘an extraordinary attempt, perhaps to be matched with the attempt to revive the Irish language for a new Irish literature’.⁵⁰ Louis Golding, the novelist and author of the 1933 critical work, *James Joyce*, claims that in *Work in Progress* Joyce is ‘inventing and synthesising language in a way that may affect the whole practice of letters, and through that channel revive the common

⁴⁸ Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 45.

⁴⁹ The *Anna Livia Plurabelle* episode, is published in a run of 850 copies by New York publishers Crosby Gaige in 1928, and had appeared in earlier drafts in *Le Navire d'Argent* 1 in October 1925 and *Two Worlds* in March 1926. It would eventually constitute Book 1, Chapter 8 of *Finnegans Wake* (pp. 196–216). *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies: A Fragment from Work in Progress*, is published in a run of 1,000 copies the Hague and London by Servire Press and Faber & Faber in 1934 and had appeared in *transition* 22 in February 1933. It subsequently constitutes Book 2, Chapter 1 of *Finnegans Wake* (pp. 219–59). See Crispi and Slote, pp. 490–94, for a full account.

⁵⁰ Robert H. Deming, (ed.), *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), II, p. 395.

language'.⁵¹ Attempts at creating universal languages, such as Volapuk or Esperanto, are related points of comparison for Stuart Gilbert and Robert McAlmon in *Our Exagmination*.⁵² The early reviews also claim that the Dublin reader's familiarity with the Hiberno-English which forms the base language of *Work in Progress* eases the difficulty of reading it. When faced with what Michael Petch describes in 1931 as its 'composite vocabulary' and 'synthetic and amorphous' characters, early readers of *Work in Progress* often resort to variations on this exegetical strategy, which positions Joyce's radical departure from linguistic norms as traceable back to his Irishness and his attention to Irish dialects.⁵³ For example, Padraic Colum reassures the readers of his preface to *Anna Livia Plurabelle* that Joyce, 'the most daring of innovators, has decided to be as local as a hedge-poet', grounding *Work in Progress* in Dublin and 'its little shops and its little shows, the nick-names that have been given to its near-great, the cant-phrases that have been used on its side-streets'.⁵⁴

The reassurance that at least some parts of *Work in Progress* will sound out lucidly to Dublin ears also tempers the confusion and hostility which characterizes more typical Irish responses. An unsigned review in the *Irish Times* of *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies* criticizes the text as 'nearly as incomprehensible as anything in print can be' yet, to offer readers some hope, emphasizes its continuity with *Ulysses* in one particular aspect: 'Many of the allusions in "Work in Progress" depend on purely local knowledge'.⁵⁵ Despite the travails of reading him, this reviewer suggests, a certain class of Joyce's Irish readers may take comfort in the fact that parts 'of his work never can be understood by those who are not Dubliners'.⁵⁶ As Brooker writes, what characterizes the 'general complexity' of contemporary Irish

⁵¹ Louis Golding, *James Joyce* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933), p. 154

⁵² Stuart Gilbert, 'Prolengomena to Work in Progress,' in Samuel Beckett, Eugene Jolas et al (eds) *Our Exagmination*, pp. 47–76, (pp. 58, 57); Robert McAlmon, 'Mr. Joyce Directs an Irish Word Ballet', in *Our Exagmination*, pp 103–16, (p. 110), cited in Nico Israel's discussion of Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* and Esperanto, 'Esperantic Modernism: Joyce, Universal Language, and Political Gesture', *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, 2.1 (February 2017)

<<https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/esperantic-modernism>> [accessed 17 December 2019].

⁵³ Deming, pp. 546–47.

⁵⁴ Deming, pp. 389–90.

⁵⁵ 'Joyce's Experiment with Language', review of *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies*, by James Joyce, *Irish Times*, 27 May 1934, p. 7.

⁵⁶ 'Joyce's Experiment with Language', review of *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies*, by James Joyce, *Irish Times*, 27 May 1934, p. 7.

responses to Joyce is that he is repeatedly “‘brought home” or pulled back to earth, with the implicit or explicit claim that only Dubliners really understand him’.⁵⁷ Critics and reviewers therefore deal with what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* as Joyce’s ‘worldwide reterritorializations’ by undertaking a very particular ‘reterritorialization’ of their own.⁵⁸ Golding cites an occasion when a group reading aloud from *Work in Progress* are overheard by ‘a garage proprietor, who had emigrated from Dublin nearly three decades ago’ and who, marching over and seizing the text for himself, detects ‘veiled reference after reference to the city’; Golding concludes that ‘without this gentlemen’s very special sort of culture, it was quite impossible to divine the whole that Joyce intended’.⁵⁹

This context begins to explain why O’Nolan would craft his pastiche of *Work in Progress* by exploiting (to an extreme degree) the same materials favoured by the ‘division of tradition based on essentialism’ within the language debate.⁶⁰ As with Myles’s claim to be undertaking a translation of *Ulysses* into Irish (*CL*, 22 August 1956, p. 6), or Devlin and Montgomery’s project to translate the corpus of French modernist poetry into Irish, this literary performance is an example of his circle’s interest in exploring the potential of an Irish-language literature which is engaged with the European avant-garde.⁶¹ The idea that ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ is an attempt to address both the recovery of the Irish language and claims regarding the Irishness of Joycean modernism is supported by the wry framing material in the ‘Notes on Our Contributors’ section and the claims made in O’Nolan’s letter to Sheehy which positions the vignette as a small extract from a larger work that would attempt to do solely in Irish what Joyce undertakes in many languages. In a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column written on the occasion of Joyce’s death which is cited by Ó Conaire, O’Nolan’s column draws a comparison between the modernist avant-garde and medieval Irish by suggesting that Joyce’s work applies to the wider world ‘an stuaim liteardha is dúthchasach de threibh na tire seo’ (the native literary craft of the tribes of this

⁵⁷ Joseph Brooker, *Joyce’s Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 200–1.

⁵⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polon (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 19.

⁵⁹ Golding, *James Joyce*, pp. 151–52.

⁶⁰ Ó Néill, “‘Erse-atz” and “Gaelassenheit””, p. 11.

⁶¹ O’Neill, *Niall Montgomery Dublinman*, p. 85.

land).⁶² Elsewhere, Myles associates the language revival with Joycean modernism when he compares the moment when ‘poor Jimmy Joyce abolished the King’s English’ to that time when he ‘founded the Rathmines branch of the Gaelic League [...] to revive a distant language in which absolutely nothing could be said’ (*CL*, 27 November 1942, p. 3).

2.4. The maidservant and the mob

‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ engages with the contexts of Joyce’s reception and the language revival by introducing characters like Shem and Shaun from *Work in Progress* into a pub brawl scene which, via its stylistics, simultaneously positions itself in the present-day location of Grogan’s pub on Leeson Street and amidst texts and scenes from the medieval Irish tradition. The story is related by ‘Fanny ancilla Barnapi’ (Barnapi’s maidservant, Fanny), who is writing it down ‘in the province of Leinster’ because ‘techt urmhóir aeise a fir’ (immensely great age had come to her man).⁶³ Fanny both writes the story down as the narrator and participates in its plot. She represents one of the few instances of a female narrator in O’Nolan’s work, although there are female-penned fake letters to *Blather*.⁶⁴ Fanny tells her story in a succinct and assertive tone, frequently referring to herself with the formulation ‘ol meisi .i. in fanny’ (said I, that is, Fanny), and recollects verses which are sung by Barnabas word for word.⁶⁵ Though it is published in the intervening period between the first and second publications of ‘Pisa Bec’, the structure and technique of Fanny’s storytelling is reminiscent of the naive autobiographical style of the female narrator in *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (*Peig: Her Own Story*) (1936), one of the Blasket Island Gaelic autobiographies which informs O’Nolan’s 1941 novel, *An Béal Bocht*. In this novel, Peig Sayers serves as a maid for much of her childhood and she later narrates several

⁶² Ó Conaire, ‘Ó Nualláin, na Scéalta “Meán-Ghaelige” & Sem Seoighe’, *Combar*, 71.12 (Nollaig 2011), 29–38 (p. 36), citing *CL*, 25 January 1941, p. 6.

⁶³ The original version is republished in the *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 51–52, alongside the translation by Tobias Harris, John Wyse Jackson, and Thomas O’Donnell, ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus: An Extract from *Work in Progress* by Briain O Nuallain’, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 54–55. Hereafter referenced as ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’.

⁶⁴ Such as ‘Minnie, Stoneybatter South’ in *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), p. 8. For a discussion of the role of women and misogyny in O’Nolan’s novels *The Hard Life*, *The Dalkey Archive* and *Cruiskeen Lawn*, see Long, pp. 149–90.

⁶⁵ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

drinking scenes in which, despite the amount of alcohol consumed, the songs sung are captured word for word. Like O’Nolan’s narrator, she is a vocal and active participant in the events she narrates.⁶⁶ Fanny’s style also invites a comparison with Joyce’s Issy, narrator of *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies* which (it is argued in more detail below) may form the immediate Wakean model for ‘Pisa Bec’.⁶⁷ Fanny’s straightforward narration of the conclusion to the story’s conflict with the words ‘do tuit caeca fer le cach nech uainn in adaig sin’ (each of us killed fifty men that night) may be compared to Issy’s abrupt presentation of the ‘argument’ in this episode between Maggies and Murphys: ‘And they are met, face a facing. They are set, force to force’.⁶⁸ Finally, this framing device may also refer to Joyce’s reliance on his friend and secretary Paul Léon to manage his affairs and help him to read and write in the 1930s when his eyesight was bad.⁶⁹

Fanny tells of an occasion upon which she was in ‘ppallas Groigin Lúsáin’ (Grogan’s Leeson palace) in the company of Barnapi/Barnabas and Pangur Bán, the eponymous subject of a ninth-century Irish poem which compares the cat Pangur’s hunt for mice to a scholar’s hunt for knowledge. Grogan’s bar features in *At Swim- Two-Birds* (CN, p. 34) and is also the scene of Sheridan’s anecdote about O’Nolan’s plan for the assembling of the *Children of Destiny* novel, the ‘first masterpiece of the Ready-Made or Reach-Me-Down School’.⁷⁰ In 1940 O’Nolan, writing as Flann O’Brien, describes Grogan’s as, along with Higgins’s on Pembroke Street, ‘noted for the punctilious attendances of students from “National” [UCD]’ – as opposed to Trinity College students, who prefer Davy Byrne’s and Mulligan’s – in an article for *The Bell*.⁷¹ In ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ Grogan’s is described as a kind of pub-church, somewhere between a feasting hall and a cloister. Mostly it is referred to as a ‘cell’, a

⁶⁶ *Peig: A Scéal Féin*, ed. by Máire ní Chinnéide (Dublin: Talbot 1936).

⁶⁷ James Joyce, ‘Continuation of a “Work in Progress”’, *transition*, 22 (February 1933), pp. 50–77; James Joyce, *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies: A Fragment from Work in Progress* (The Hague: Servire Press, 1934).

⁶⁸ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.; Joyce, pp. 223, 223.

⁶⁹ Léon’s spouse Lucie writes that he ‘transcribed and corrected manuscripts, read aloud to Joyce, took care of business and personal mail, and saw to contacts with publishers’ in *James Joyce and Paul L. Léon: The Story of a Friendship, A proceeding of the James Joyce Society delivered in part at the meeting of November 18, 1948* (Gotham Book Mart: New York, 1950), p. 8

⁷⁰ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, p. 42.

⁷¹ Flann O’Brien, ‘The Trade in Dublin’, *The Bell*, 1.2 (November 1940), 6–15, p. 11.

word often used to describe churches, monasteries and holy places, but also by variations on ‘leam teach’ (sweet house).⁷² The eulogy to Grogan’s in ‘Pisa Bec’ and the prominent speaking role it gives to Grogan himself as a publican illustrates the significance of the public house as a liminal zone in O’Nolan’s work. The public house in texts including *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and *Thirst* is a place where legal and extra-legal forms of authority are blurred and male linguistic performances generate self-contained worlds. It is in this respect that J. C. C. Mays traces the influence of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* on *At Swim*, when he suggests that the student narrator’s novel centres on ‘the dreams of a publican, a “night-logic” world which obeys its own laws and appears to be liberated from customary physical restraints, all its characters merging into each other around a small core of fixed types’.⁷³

Such a ‘night-logic’ applies to the public house of ‘Pisa Bec’. It becomes the site of an extraordinary confrontation between Barnabas, Fanny and Pangur, characters who stand for the literary circle around O’Nolan (as Ó Conaire’s account suggests), and an invading mob of commoners who are curiously associated with the characters of *Work in Progress*.⁷⁴ Barnabas, Fanny and Pangur are enjoying themselves, drinking and listening to ‘seinsceóil’ (old stories) recounted by ‘naem Grogáin’ (saintly Grogan), when they are interrupted by the arrival of Shem and his brother Seán from ‘Dúitchi Seoighe hi Gailimh’ (Joyce country in Galway) and a mob of the ‘hoi poppolloi’. The way that these interlopers, who do not speak directly, are described is one instance where several languages appear to be squashed together. The mass of people, ‘five and twenty battalions’, are described as ‘iomad aroile fer risaraidter hoi poppolloi oc Grecoip issa Róimh Phedair Pap’. But when the medieval Irish is unpicked the only truly non-native word is ‘hoi poppolloi’, the well-known ancient Greek phrase for the vulgar masses, augmented with an extra syllable added in a way which is reminiscent of Earwicker’s stuttering in *Finnegans Wake*. The description of Shem and Seán’s party of hangers-on translates as ‘a crowd of other men – as the Greeks say in the Rome of Pope Peter, “hoi poppolloi”’. So they are described as they would be, in Greek, in Rome, during the early Christian period. The word ‘risaraidter’ echoes the Old Norse ‘berg-risi’ (mountain giants), but is in

⁷² ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

⁷³ J. C. C. Mays, ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination’ in O’Keeffe (ed.), *Myles*, p. 106.

⁷⁴ Ó Conaire, p. 5.

fact an Irish word. ‘Grecoip’ is a distortion of the more obscure medieval Irish ‘Grécaib’ (Greek).⁷⁵ The result is a misleading Wakean effect and an example of O’Nolan’s ‘hybrid’ language strings where orthography and phonetics play dissonantly together to evoke ‘half-said’ meanings.⁷⁶ Its overtones of Greek and Norse resolve into obscure Old and Middle Irish terms.

The problem for Barnabas is that these *boi polloi* are themselves ‘buying drinks and rubbing together and getting into conversations with each other’. ‘Mór in éighemh’, this noisy ‘hullabaloo’ angers Barnabas, who orders Grogan not to share out the ‘porter tonnbán’ (white-waved porter) using the phrase, ‘[ná] roinnter ár proind’ ([do] not let our food be shared) which is repeated several times in the text.⁷⁷ This phrasing is a deliberate aping of the awkward form of the passive-as-imperative form commonly used in Civil Service jargon and signs, such as notices in offices of the Irish Civil Service in the mid-1930s commanding: “‘Má tá Gaedhealg agat labhair í” (If you know Irish, speak it)’, otherwise translatable as ‘If you know Irish, it is to be spoken’.⁷⁸ Though describing porter using the general term ‘proinn’ (a meal, or the act of taking the main meal of the day) rather than something more specific and contemporary, derives from medieval texts,⁷⁹ the imperative-as-passive mood is a modern development which simplifies the difficulties of the Irish imperative at the cost of weakening its meaning. Indeed, it’s possible to read this phrase as signifying precisely the opposite. Jonathan Ó Néill remarks how, in his 1932 Irish-language short stories ‘Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ’sa Bhliain 2032!’ and ‘Teacht agus Imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe’, O’Nolan ‘introduces a sort of hybridised temporality [...] whereby the narratives are set in a future characterised by the past, and language issues remain intricately bound up in the “former” colonial situation’.⁸⁰ In ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’

⁷⁵ E.V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, 2nd edn., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), p. 335. *Grécaib* is found in the *Book of Leinster*, <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G800011E/index.html>> [accessed 13 August 2019].

⁷⁶ Kager, p. 64; Flynn, p. 80, citing *CL*, 28 November 1940, p. 4.

⁷⁷ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

⁷⁸ Recommendation by the Terminology Committee written in 1934 and circulated to the Civil Service on 12 January 1935, qtd. in Colmán L O’Huallacháin, *The Irish Language in Society* (Coleraine: University of Ulster Press, 1991), p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Electronic Irish Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s. v., ‘proind, (proinn)’ <<http://dil.ie/34594>> [accessed 25 July 2016].

⁸⁰ Ó Néill, “‘Erse-atz” and “Gaelassenheit””, p. 12.

the impression of a plot which occurs simultaneously in a pub of the 1930s and a medieval holy place is created by this sort of wordplay. A continual movement between the two temporalities within lexical constructions such as ‘porter tonnán’ (which combines a kenning taken from an Old Irish lyric with the more familiar ‘porter’) is permitted by the ambiguities of the language revival, during which compilers and legislators could not settle on a single century, let alone a single dialect, in which to communicate.

Grogan, behaving as any publican would, naturally refuses Barnabas’s injunction not to share the porter because ‘inmain leam a nairged’ (their money is dear to me). Barnabas changes tack: entreating the publican with a speech, liberally embellished with Latin and Greek, in which he opines: ‘As é in porter mo lemnacht as é no sherc ocus lux mo bethadh as é in alpha bhus ferr lem ocus fós mo omega, asé mo barr ocus mo tón. na roinnter ar proinn for feruip Éirenn’ (Porter is my new milk or love and the light of my life. It is my favourite alpha and also my omega, it is my top and my bottom. Do not let the food be shared with the men of Ireland).⁸¹ The sense of a Wakean *flyting* or a literary tussle over finite resources in the vignette may reflect the fact that, despite their eminent talent, the means of supporting themselves only by writing were denied to O’Nolan and members of his circle such as Sheridan, Montgomery, or Devlin. Instead, they had to enter positions in professions or government.

Barnabas bolsters his case by reinforcing his Gaelic credentials with the recitation of a lay consisting of three quatrains of poetry modelled on the metrical patterns of ‘Pangur Bán’. These verses do not prevail on Grogan and he and Fanny, after muttering a Latin quotation from Horace about their disdain for the ‘profane vulgus’, decide to take matters into their own hands. Barnabus instructs her to attack: ‘marptar latsa fén Shem; Seán lemsa immo aenar’ (let Shem be killed by yourself; I will do for Seán alone). A massacre ensues in which ‘do tuit caeca fer le cach nech uainn in adaig sin’ (each of us killed fifty men that night), the bodies are buried underneath the pub ‘for ecla bolled ocus fós epidemik’ (for fear of the smell and even an epidemic), and the trio thrust their victorious swords into the earth. This Oedipal carnage, in which the massed, unspeaking emissaries of ‘Joyce country’ are slain in a scene of violence inspired by slaughter scenes in medieval texts like *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel) in the Ulster Cycle is the

⁸¹ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

piece's most extreme response to *Work in Progress*.⁸² The identification of 'shem ocus séan' with the *boi polloi* in this battle both inverts the typical perception of Joyce's writing as the preoccupation of an elitist coterie and, in a characteristic move by O'Nolan, literalizes the notion which early reviewers propagated that a Dublin ear was required to understand the prose of *Work in Progress*.

It is a satirical strategy which is alive to the creative potentialities involved in blurring boundaries between the literary and the popular and which resonates throughout O'Nolan's work as a central vector of his engagement with Joycean modernism. For example, the mass of shape-shifting people competing for a share at the table in Grogan's bar can be productively compared with the characters of Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. These men have tastes that could not be more prosaic, pining after the commoditized working man's verse of Jem Casey (CN, pp. 74–75). However, at the same time they are literary characters involved in the unwriting and rewriting of themselves. The trio employ Orlick as an authorial instrument to further fragment and transform their personalities at the end of the book when they place its publican protagonist on trial. In this sequence, Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey can also be seen as a version of the clamouring voices and judges of *Finnegans Wake*, who have simply been endowed with a more naturalistic (and popularly accessible) representation (CN, pp. 187–205). The bloody scenes enacted by this confused clash between popular and literary are also representative of the close association between acts of authorship, interpretation and metalepsis as acts of violence in O'Nolan's work of the 1930s. The activities of Trellis and his gruesome torture and trial in *At Swim-Two-Birds* repeatedly pose the metaleptic act as one of violence; in this novel, no boundary between literary levels is traversed without a wounding toll exacted on one or other of the parties involved.

After this 'dorta-foila' (spilling of blood), Barnabas 'dig móir eisti ocus bheós ath-dig eile' (drinks a great drink and then another re-drink) and experiences a sort of dream vision in which 'conar cuala ceol ainglidi ocus téda sighi oc aines agus oc aeibhnes inna chenn and fós conarconaic coin allta ac salmgabáil inna fiadnuisi' (he heard the music of angels and the fairy strings playing and plucking in his head there.

⁸² This is a particularly challenging line to translate: neither 'bolled' nor 'epidemik' have precedents. Here, 'bolled' has been translated as *bolad*, 'scent, smell' <<https://www.teanglann.ie/ga/fgb/boladh>> [accessed 17 December 2019]. The variant spelling 'epidemik' is another example of a complex near-neologism, where a non-native 'k' has been inserted into what, this time, is actually an English word.

He even saw wolves reciting psalms in his presence). He then recites a verse paean to these ‘menmain ar esba’ (thoughts of folly) and the story concludes with these lines, terminating in what is certainly (perhaps alluding to Beckett’s remark on the *Wake* in 1929 that ‘[the] language is drunk’) intended to be a hiccup:⁸³

Dala Quarnapoís, robhaoi-siumh amlaidh a ccoicríoch Groigín ceocáoís ar
mhís ar febus fwiskis na cilli-si agus ba ferr leis aitreabhadh ann indás in
ngach ionadh for talmain ina egmuis. Foirchinn co hairithi inso. Hic finit.
Hic!

(This happened to Quarnapoís, he was like this in Groigín’s country for a
fortnight and a month because of the excellence of the whiskey of that
sanctuary and it was more delightful for him to stay there than in anywhere
else in the world. This is a certain end. Thus it finishes. Hic!)

2.5. Medieval sources

A clause in the antepenultimate sentence of this final passage, ‘ann indás in ngach ionadh for talmain ina egmuis’, is lifted from *Buile Suibhne* (The frenzy of Sweeny), one of the principal sources for *At Swim-Two-Birds*.⁸⁵ The rest of the vignette provides further evidence for O’Nolan’s close attention to his study of medieval Irish poetry, which is downplayed by Cronin on the basis of the rejected first draft for his M.A thesis, ‘Nádúir-fhilíocht na Gaedhilge’ (Nature poetry in Irish).⁸⁶ Ó hÁinle, by revealing the extensive range of early Irish sources for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, argues that there is in fact ‘ample evidence to prove that either as an undergraduate or later while writing his M.A thesis he read quite assiduously those works prescribed for the primary degree’.⁸⁷ Naughton goes further to refute aspects of Cronin’s characterization of the thesis’s subject matter as ‘both erroneous and misleading’ and, most recently, Louis de Paor has defended O’Nolan as an ‘innovative and ambitious’

⁸³ Samuel Beckett, Eugene Jolas, et al., *Our Exagmination* p. 14.

⁸⁴ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

⁸⁵ J. G. O’Keeffe (ed.), *Buile Shuibhne*, electronic edition compiled by Beatrix Färber (CELT, University College Cork, 2013) <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G302018.html>> [accessed 20 February 2020], lines 539–40.

⁸⁶ Cronin, p. 66.

⁸⁷ Ó hÁinle, p. 19.

student of medieval Irish poetry and argued for the central role O’Nolan’s notion of ‘Celtic realism’ plays in his aesthetics and philosophy of language.⁸⁸ O’Nolan is a translator of Middle Irish poetry and the verses in ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ provide evidence that he is also adept at writing in Middle Irish.⁸⁹ The first set of three quatrains run as follows:

As ionmhain leam teach graigín binn
 cuannacht a corn lem is aibhinn
 Mingur gringur Pangur bán
 póstar linn in leann mar leannán.

Airm a n-ibhter deoch na naem
 cell a mbentar cloc na fíraén
 Maith in meisci and cen treoir
 suairc iat sein-sceoil saemh a senóir.

Mingur gringur gin and it
 Veritas (in vino) adsit,
 Meisi ocus Pangur fionn
 slighi na fírinde linn as ionmhainn.

(Dear to me the house of sweet Graigín
 Handsome its protection, I think it beautiful
 Pangur bán purrs and meows
 We are wedded to drink like a lover.

I drink the drink of the saints
 In the sanctuary where there is the bell of the righteous
 Good the drunkenness there without guidance

⁸⁸ Naughton, 'Nádúir-Philíocht na Gaedhíle and Flann O'Brien's Fiction', p. 86.; de Paor, pp. 194, 197.

⁸⁹ Three of his translations, first published as Myles na gCopaleen in MacDonagh (ed), *Poems from Ireland*, pp. 66–77, are included in as translations by Flann O’Brien in John Montague (ed.), *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 56, 79, 106–107.

Pleasant are the old-tales of the crooked elder.

A mouth, there, purrs and meows

Truth (in wine) is found

Me and Pangur the white

The ways of truth are dear to us.)⁹⁰

These verses correspond closely to the meter of the original ‘Pangur Bán’ poem and to adhere to the correct rhyming conventions within the complex grammar and morphology of medieval Irish is not easy. An analysis of the prose components of ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ reveals a patchwork of words and phrases derived from the Old and Middle Irish texts which made up O’Nolan’s syllabus at UCD. Along with *Buile Suibhne*, another source is *Acallam na Senórach* (*The Colloquy of the Ancients*), read through Douglas Hyde’s 1924 abridged version, *An Agallamh Bheag*, which is the source of the epigraph to ‘Pisa Bec’.⁹¹ O’Nolan would have also known that both texts are themselves synthetic compositions. *Acallam na Senórach* is a frame narrative for ‘hundreds of stories and poems in the work, representing a huge mass of medieval Irish literary traditions’.⁹² The extant version of *Buile Suibhne* is also a ‘composite’ in which ‘several sources of different dates’ are combined.⁹³

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has not attempted to resolve the tension between reading ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ as either a virtuoso performance of writing in a fossilized Irish, in a homage to the medieval tradition, or as an avant-garde revitalization of the language inspired by *Work in Progress*. Instead it has sought to demonstrate, through the presentation of contexts and comments that interweave Joyce’s work with the debate surrounding Irish language modernization, that the vignette synthesizes these two impulses and refuses to come down on one side or the other. This chapter does wish to argue, however, that O’Nolan’s ‘Bhark i bPrágrais’ reveals him to be an attentive

⁹⁰ ‘A Little Bit by Barnabus’, pp. 51, 54.

⁹¹ Ó hÁinle, p. 19. Translation of title by Ó hÁinle.

⁹² Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, ‘Introduction’, in *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. viii.

⁹³ Alexandra Berghol, ‘The Authorship and Transmission of *Buile Shuibhne*: A Re-Appraisal’, in Carey (ed.), *Buile Suibhne*, p. 96.

and perceptive reader of the serializations of *Work in Progress* during the 1930s. The very existence of a cogent plot in ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ suggests that O’Nolan understands that *Work in Progress* is more than a lexical revolution in which, as Eugene Jolas suggests, ‘language is being born anew before our eyes’ or, according to Beckett, conventional language gives way to ‘the savage economy of hieroglyphics’.⁹⁴ Whilst drawing on and satirizing the linguistic innovations which Jolas and Beckett celebrate, O’Nolan’s pastiche also recognizes that the *Wake* is a story of people and arguments.

It is also this chapter’s contention that there is a specific Joycean source. The first publication of ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ in *Comhthrom Féinne* in the winter of 1935 dates its likely composition in the preceding two years and, although specific borrowings from a given episode of *Work in Progress* are not obvious, the story itself points towards the most likely model: the opening sections of Book 2. Finn Fordham concludes his genetic study, *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake: Unravelling Universals*, with a discussion of the book’s ‘little people’, including the ‘twelve’ Murphys who, in one manifestation, are the “CUSTOMERS”, climbing up the social scale [...] looking forward to their days off and to drinking holidays (“inn quest”) in Book 2, Chapter 1.⁹⁵ Subsequently, in Book 2, Chapter 2, ‘during the mathematics problem, the power of large numbers is communicated to the twins, whose minds are becoming filled with the possibility of a revolution. Thus the spawning and sprawling potential is emphasised’.⁹⁶ O’Nolan would have come across the opening section of Book 2 when it was printed in *transition* 22 in February 1933 or in the 1934 edition of *The Mime of Mick, Nick and the Maggies*. The way that the massing people sprawl and get in the way is satirized by concretizing their shifting presences into a queue at a bar: the pub is so full that Barnabas cannot get a drink. By putting this aspect of *Work in Progress* at the centre of his vignette, O’Nolan demonstrates his interest in the ‘pluralized people’ and how they impact the *Wake*’s composition as they ‘proliferate and spread over the antecedent forms, inserting themselves awkwardly, superseding, breaking up and dispersing what has gone before’.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Berghol, pp. 44, 11.

⁹⁵ Finn Fordham, *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake: Unravelling Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 228, 234.

⁹⁶ Fordham, p. 234.

⁹⁷ Fordham, p. 243.

This early interest is contiguous with O’Nolan’s ongoing fascination with the potentialities of the ‘plain people’ to break up and overturn authoritative discourses. Taaffe suggests that when O’Nolan refers to the ‘Plain People of Ireland’ in *Cruiskeen Lawn* he speaks to a younger generation who ‘had been raised on political appeals “To the Plain People of Ireland” (as one republican newspaper headed its editorials)’.⁹⁸ She refers to *The Plain People / An Daoine Macánta*, a radical republican newspaper published between April and July 1922. Not only do the ‘plain people’ in O’Nolan’s work therefore bear this connotation of an insurrectionary republicanism, *The Plain People* anticipates O’Nolan’s formal experimentation with one series consisting of aphorisms directed against the Treatyite politicians entitled ‘Mion-Chiannt’ (Small-Talk), and another series in Irish entitled ‘Smaointí’ (Some thoughts), which are both subtitles used by O’Nolan in *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns.⁹⁹

In his essay about the representation of Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive*, Stephen Abblitt suggests that O’Nolan adopts an ‘ironic’ modernist pose which is capable of ‘saying one thing and meaning it, while also, excessively, saying and meaning something else too’. O’Nolan’s ‘animosity towards Joyce and his dismissals of literary modernism also displays his love of Joyce and his homage to literary modernism’.¹⁰⁰ ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ lends support to this characterization at the opposite pole of O’Nolan’s career. In response to the critics who invited Dubliners to consider themselves ideal readers of *Work in Progress*, O’Nolan constructs a text in which the parodic ideal reader is no mere Dubliner but a scholar of the most arcane realms of the Irish language. Whilst bristling with jocular animosity towards all things Joycean, this text also presents itself as a knowing homage to *Work in Progress*. In doing so, it is a virtuoso performance of the hybridizing ‘interfusional’ strategy which underpins O’Nolan’s implicit agenda for the Irish language. Though certainly askance to it, this anti-essentialist agenda is far more akin to the subversive project of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* than against it. O’Nolan’s ‘Bhark i bPrágrais’ suggests that the final word in

⁹⁸ Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys: the citizen and the artist’, in Baines (ed.), *Is it about a bicycle?*, pp. 112–26 (p. 112).

⁹⁹ Anon., ‘Mion-Chiannt’, *The Plain People / An Daoine Macánta* 1.1 (9 April 1922), p. 2, a phrase used in ‘Pisa bec’ p. 165; Anon., ‘Smaointí’, *The Plain People / An Daoine Macánta*, 1.2 (16 April 1922), p. 2, also used a subsection title in *Cruiskeen Lawn* such as ‘Smaointe Reatha’ (Quick thoughts) in *CL*, 28 July 1942, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Abblitt, p. 65.

the language debate should belong to Fénus Farrsaid: the scholar who first assembled Irish from the wreckage of Babel.

Chapter 3 - *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Irish print culture

3.1. Introduction

For all of its expansiveness, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is named for a precise location – *Snámh Dá Én* – the ford near Clonmacnois which marks the centre-point of two lines that bisect Ireland: its ancient north to south highway and the east to west journey of the Shannon. O’Nolan himself favoured the title of *Sweeny in the Trees* (since *At Swim-Two-Birds* was ‘clearly defective from a commercial viewpoint’) and Sheridan says that the manuscript was ‘less a book than a territory to which [...] O’Nolan retreated to develop as he would a multitude of themes that interested him’.¹ Yet no matter how widely it ranges, the diverse territory of *At Swim* is also, as Anthony Burgess observes, shaped everywhere by forms of literary counterpoint.² The novel insists on the unity of a series of putatively opposing cultural poles: the mechanized production of the modern novel versus the oral traditions of Irish storytelling; the refined enjoyment of highbrow modernism versus the mass consumption of Hollywood movies; and the fantasy of Revival versus the realism of counter-Revival. As the Pooka states, ‘truth is an odd number’ even if ‘my personal number is Two’ (*CN*, pp. 103, 105). Declan Kiberd suggests that O’Nolan ‘saw his book as a potential bestseller, which might simultaneously appeal to highbrow and popular taste’.³ At least keen to market the book as such, on 31 January 1938 O’Nolan writes to his literary agent, A. M. Heath and Co., claiming that ‘[for] all its defects, I feel it has the ingredients that make the work of writers from this beautiful little island acceptable’ (*L*, p.6). Here, there is a note of irony. As Taaffe writes, *At Swim* ‘gives voice to the demands of the literary marketplace’ by following *Ulysses* in its ‘combination and juxtaposition of many different literary styles’, but the effect is ‘far different’.⁴ O’Nolan’s text may include all of the ‘ingredients’ that make Irish novels successful, but they are not properly mixed together and the result is a ‘jarring combination of

¹ Brian O’Nolan, ‘Letters’, in *Alive-alive O! Flann O’Brien’s At Swim-Two-Birds*, ed. by Rüdiger Imhof (Wolfhound Press: Dublin, 1985) pp. 39-41 (p. 39). Sheridan’s remark is cited by J. C. C. Mays in ‘Literalist of the Imagination’, *ibid.*, pp. 81-86 (p. 81) and given as ‘Brian, Flann and Myles, *Irish Times*, 1 April 1971, p. 10.

² Anthony Burgess, ‘Probably a Masterpiece’, in *Alive-Alive O!*, pp. 70-71

³ Declan Kiberd. *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), p. 501.

⁴ Taaffe, p. 47.

critical voices'.⁵ This chapter builds on those thoughts by bringing three contexts to bear on *At Swim* as a response to the Irish book market and its surrounding cultural commentary in the 1930s: firstly, the chapter refers to the pathology as a concept which was often applied to both avant-garde art and popular culture, and which helps explicate how *At Swim* mediates between them; secondly, the chapter discusses the formal technique of montage as a twentieth-century procedure of cultural production which is central to the realization of *At Swim*'s reply to its context; thirdly, the chapter addresses the influence of Heinrich Heine's *Die Harzreise* (*The Harz Journey*), which grounds O'Nolan's use of montage in an earlier, Romantic, tradition of fragment aesthetics.⁶ Thus armed, the chapter uses *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a lens to examine the forces shaping Ireland's reading culture in this period.⁷

Like O'Nolan's other work, *At Swim* is the product of a collaborative process. Through her study of *Comthrom Féinne*, Taaffe substantiates Clissmann's earlier suggestion that *At Swim-Two-Birds* is born from a literary subculture that existed amongst the student body at UCD in the 1930s: 'the intellectual headquarters of Catholic, nationalist Ireland'.⁸ Taaffe points out that through the very structure of the novel as a 'work in progress', *At Swim* is able to 'draw attention to both [O'Nolan's] contemporary intellectual environment and his literary precursors. The result is an intertextual work which emphasizes the actual process, and the context, of the act of writing (and reading)'.⁹ John Wyse Jackson also pursues this university setting as an influence on O'Nolan's style of metafiction in *Phenolphthalein: A Fictional Quest for the Eighth Plot* (1997), and discovers a potentially influential story in the Trinity College magazine, *The College Pen*, published in 1929. The story, 'Individua Trinitas: A Bloody Tale', gives its author's name as 'Phenolphthalein' and concerns Timothy Duff, a student pathologist who assassinates the college staff one by one and, deploying doppelgängers he controls to replace them, is eventually murdered by his own creations. 'Individua Trinitas', which Wyse Jackson claims is the work of his own father, exhibits the same morbid blend of murder and metafiction found in the 'Scenes in a Novel' vignette in *Blather*, in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and in O'Nolan's short

⁵ Taaffe, p. 47.

⁶ Taaffe, 'Tell me this', p. 255.

⁷ Taaffe, p. 47.

⁸ Clissmann, p. 65; Taaffe, p. 62.

⁹ Heine is mentioned briefly in Taaffe, p. 34.

story, ‘Two in One’.¹⁰ These contexts support the sense in which *At Swim* is a collaborative production of the university circle to which O’Nolan belonged. Most significantly, its ‘autobiographical core’ is based on conversations with Sheridan, who found himself ‘living a sort of double life’ as Brinsley in the book and who claims to have edited out ‘about one-fifth’ of the text before it was sent off to the publisher, Longman.¹¹

3.2. Pathology

When O’Nolan writes to Heath that ‘[for] all its defects, I feel [*At Swim*] has the ingredients that make the work of writers from this beautiful little island acceptable’ (*L*, p. 6), the sense of veiled irony is supported by the fact that, far from valuing the work of ‘writers from this beautiful little island’, O’Nolan in the guise of Myles na gCopaleen frequently presents readers with pathological analyses of Irish reading and writing, as will be discussed shortly, and the concept of the pathological is central to the satire of *At Swim*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for ‘pathology’, as well as noting the now obscure senses of ‘sorrows, sufferings’ and ‘the branch of knowledge that deals with emotions’, defines four sites for pathological analyses: the body, the mind, in cultural and social spheres, and in mathematical systems.¹² The word ‘pathology’ turns out to be ontologically infectious: expanding outwards from concrete to abstract meanings, spreading as a term for illness and disorder into numerous domains. The sense of a ‘pathology’ also consistently slips between subject and object. It is always taken to signify both the study of disease in a given system and the diseased features or symptoms in that system. Continuing its earlier doubled meaning (both sorrow and the study of sorrows) the pathology continues to stand for both the act of diagnosis and the manifestation of the disease that is being diagnosed. Various critics have commented upon this traffic of meaning between diagnosis and malady. In Karl Kraus’s famous judgement on the work of Sigmund Freud, the great publicist of the pathological, ‘psychoanalysis is the disease of which

¹⁰ Brother Barnabas, ‘Scenes in a Novel’ *Comhthrom Féinne*, 8.2 (May 1934) and *Blather*, 1.1 (August 1934), pp. 9–11, repr. in *MBM*, p. 77–81; Myles na Gopaleen, ‘Two in One’, *The Bell*, 19.8 (July 1954), 30–34, repr. in *SF*, pp. 84–89.

¹¹ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, pp. 44, 47.

¹² ‘pathology, n.’. *OED Online*. January 2018. Oxford University Press.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138805?redirectedFrom=Pathology>> [accessed March 14, 2018].

it claims to be the cure'.¹³ More charitably, Freud's innovation was to read the pathological symptom as, instead of an aberration, a tell-tale revenant of sickness within the normative itself. The slip of the tongue indicates our true meaning. Individual psychoanalytic cases reveal complexes which are universal.¹⁴

In his chapter on criticism and the avant-garde, Poggioli discusses how the concept of degeneration, derived from the biologist behavioural theories of Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso – who also applied the idea of degeneration to 'certain forms of modern art' – was 'destined to influence the critical terminology of many of the [...] interpreters of avant-garde art'.¹⁵ In July 1937 the German National Socialists organized the 'Entartete Kunst' (Degenerate Art) exhibition at the Munich Hofgarten, a display of 730 modernist and avant-garde paintings and sculptures by 112 artists, chaotically hung and festooned with sarcastic captions and messages scrawled on the wall to 'associate Modernism with imbecility, illness and trickery'; the exhibition attracted 20,000 visitors a day and 'proved to be the most popular modern art exhibition ever staged'.¹⁶ When introducing the first 'German Art Exhibition' at the newly built House of German Art the day before the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition opened, Hitler took occasion to attack the latter in clearly pathological terms: 'What do these artists fabricate? Deformed cripples and cretins, women who inspire nothing but disgust, human beings who are more animal than human, children who, if they looked like this, could be nothing more but God's curse on us!'¹⁷

Poggioli explores how the concept of degeneration 'led to the modern aesthetic pathology, the psychosocial diagnosis according to which any cultural manifestation of "exception" comes to be seen as a crisis or a symptom of disease'; he notes how this type of pathology is employed by hostile critics of the avant-garde of both the left and right, who consider the disease to be the same: 'liberal ideology'.¹⁸ Poggioli also observes that 'there has little by little developed an aesthetic

¹³ Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, 376–77 (30 May 1913), p. 21. Translated in Thomas Szasz, *Anti-Freud: Karl Kraus's Criticism of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990), p. 24.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathologies of Everyday Life*, trans. by A. A. Brill (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920).

¹⁵ Poggioli, p. 165.

¹⁶ Brandon Taylor, 'Post-Modernism in the Third Reich' in Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will (eds), *The Nazification of Art* (Winchester: Winchester Press, 1990), pp. 128–43 (p. 133).

¹⁷ Qtd in Taylor, p. 135.

¹⁸ Poggioli, p. 166.

pathology which is, so to speak, positive' and which 'considers the disease as the source of, or motive for, creation because it believes that philosophic or artistic genius resides naturally in a sick body or [...] sick mind'.¹⁹ That notion finds its resonance in O'Nolan's use of the term across numerous *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns when dealing with questions of language, literature and culture, including when discussing modernism and the avant-garde. As discussed in chapter one, in 1942 he explains avant-garde movements like Dada as a response to the inadequacies of language to express 'the silent agonised pathologies of the post-Versailles epoch' (*CL*, 27 November 1942, p. 3). In December 1945 he comments on the news that Radio Éireann is to launch a shortwave broadcast service to reach the Irish diaspora with the diagnosis that '[the] desire to lecture and heckle foreigners arises from a pathologic feeling of superiority and is known to medical science as paranoia' (*CL*, 5 December 1945, p. 2). The notion that personal or institutional creative ventures spring from diseased imaginations provides Myles with alternative explanations for cultural phenomena, whether large or small in scale. In May 1954 he puts forward 'what one might call the pathology of literature':

What prompts a sane, inoffensive man to write? Assuming that to "write" is mechanically to multiply communication (sometimes a rather large assumption, especially if one writes a book in Irish), what vast, yeasty eruption of egotism drives a man to address simultaneously a mass of people he has never met, and who may resent being pestered with his "thoughts"? They don't have to read what he writes, you say. But they do. That compulsion is, indeed, the most vicious neurosis that calls for investigation. The blind urge to read, the craving for print, is a very deep-seated infirmity. Some people blame compulsory education and Lord Northcliffe. Writers can be shot or put in concentration camps. But what can one do with the millions of passive print addicts? (*CL*, 7 May 1954, p. 5)

O'Nolan is also the author of his own extended pathology: the manuscript for an unpublished polemical report on the Irish language which is known as 'The Pathology of Revivalism' (taken from the title of one of its chapters), likely to have been written in 1947, which this thesis returns to in its conclusion.

¹⁹ Poggioli, p. 166.

The expansive concept of the pathology enables us to locate *At Swim* in the hall of mirrors between the individual and society – between analyst and patient, disease and diagnosis. From one angle, *At Swim* can itself be viewed as a pathological manifestation of the inner ailments of the Irish novel: a convulsive collapse of its premises. Early reviews tend to present *At Swim-Two-Birds* in this way: a deviant, perverted text which somehow runs counter to the more wholesome variety of novel. Seán Ó Faoláin, who, as discussed below, feels the Irish literary novel to be a benighted form, writes that *At Swim* ‘had an odour of spilt Joyce about it’.²⁰ From another angle, *At Swim* itself pathologizes other texts, with its clear satire on the figures and themes of both contemporary Irish culture and literary modernism. As such, it is often read by critics as an ‘anatomy’ or a Menippean satire and placed accordingly in Bakhtin’s category of novels of the ‘Second Stylistic Line’ which orchestrate heteroglossia to resist ‘unmediated and purely authorial discourse’ alongside the works of Lucian, Rabelais, Cervantes and Sterne.²¹ A review of *At Swim* in the *Times Literary Supplement* registers both of these senses: ‘having all but exhausted, with the exercise of much ingenuity, the subject of Irish content and Irish style, will he not now sit down and try his hand at writing at an Irish novel?’²²

As with Duchamp’s use of the readymade to satirize the exhibition as an institution, one could argue that O’Nolan saw himself as a motivated purveyor of intentionally bad stories and a pathologist of the novel. He evokes its dual sense of disease and diagnosis in the subtitles he gives to his other published novels and the comments he makes about them. *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*) (1941) is subtitled ‘no an Milleánach’ meaning ‘or, the fault-finding one or the one from the land of fault-finding’.²³ It is further subtitled as ‘Droch-sgéal ar an droch-shaoghal’ (a bad story about the hard life) (CN, p. 407). *The Hard Life* (1961) is subtitled ‘[an] exegesis of squalor’ (CN, p. 496) and O’Nolan describes *The Dalkey Archive* to his agent, Mark

²⁰ Seán Ó Faoláin, ‘Irish Gasconade’, *John O’London’s Weekly* (24 March 1939), p. 970.

²¹ Such as Keith Donohue in *The Irish Anatomist: A Study of Flann O’Brien* (Dublin: Maunsel & Company, 2002) and M. Keith Booker in *Flann O’Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 375.

²² Anon., ‘Nest of Novelists’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 March 1939, cited in *Alive-Alive O!*, p. 43.

²³ Translated by Mairín Nic Eoin, ‘Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks: 1941 – An Béal Bocht’, by Myles na gCopaleen’, *Irish Times*, 9 May 2011 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/modern-ireland-in-100-artworks-1941-an-b%C3%A9al-bocht-by-myles-na-gcopaleen-1.2205374>> [accessed 2 May 2018].

Hamilton, as ‘an essay in extreme derision of literary attitudes and people’.²⁴ J. C. C. Mays, in his early discussion of O’Nolan as a ‘Literalist of the Imagination’, relates his project to the notion of the pathological insofar as he posits a continual counterpoint between ‘Brian O’Nolan the artist delighting in elaboration and intricacy and humorous effect’ versus ‘Brian O’Nolan the moralist communicating his distaste for pretension and pride’.²⁵ Each of his major works (which for Mays at this point, consist of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column as collected in *The Best of Myles*) reflects this tension between vertiginous aesthetics and severe ethics: ‘Each of them locates its art firmly in a moral context, which yet only serves to prevent the norm of fantasy from degenerating into self-congratulation and to preserve its extraordinary purity’.²⁶

The aesthetics/ethics opposition is utilized to mediate the other confused binaries which pervade *At Swim*: its debates on pleasure versus moral value frame its juxtaposition of verse and realist prose, its blending of the discourse of an elitist coterie and working man’s dialogue. Furthermore, in this dualistic reading, O’Nolan’s novel comes to embody both senses of the pathological: in its ethical severity it is a study of the disease that is caused by the aesthetic imagination, yet in its *jouissance* it is the symptom of that disease. This admixture of high-minded authorial intentions and indulgence in insalubrious subject matter is found in the master plan of Dermot Trellis as presented by the narrator to Brinsley early on in *At Swim*:

It appeared to him that a great and daring book – a green book – was the crying need of the hour – a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity [...] In this book he would present two examples of humanity – a man of great depravity and a woman of unprecedented virtue. They meet. The woman is corrupted, eventually ravished and done to death in a back lane. Presented in its own milieu, in the timeless conflict of grime and beauty, gold and black, sin and grace, the tale would be a moving and salutary one. (CN, p. 32)

²⁴ Letter to Mark Hamilton, 28 November 1963, L, p. 364.

²⁵ Mays, ‘Literalist of the Imagination’, p. 81.

²⁶ Mays, ‘Literalist of the Imagination’, p. 81.

Trellis's vision of a book so morally abhorrent that it would cure the diseases of the society that reads it, functioning as 'literary aversion therapy', is explicated by the figure of the pathological.²⁷ The blurring between doctor and the patient, diagnosis and disease, that the dual sense of the pathology produces is an appropriate analogy for the author who cannot resist indulging in the perfidy which his prose is supposed to excoriate. However, whilst Trellis strikes us now as a strange and provocative invention he, like other ideas and characters in the novel, is in fact a creature of his time. Taaffe explains that '[although] Trellis is not above lacing his tale with salacious details to attract his readers, he is the model of the authors vaunted by the Catholic Truth Society and other campaigners against "evil" literature'.²⁸

3.3. Montage

The next concept this chapter introduces in relation to *At Swim* is montage: a technique that involves the juxtaposition of different elements in cinema, but also in visual art and literature where it is known variously as cut-up, bricolage or collage. Now most associated in visual arts with the collage-paintings of Picasso and Braque and the compositions of German Dada and Pop Art, montage techniques can be traced back to nineteenth-century commercial printing practices, and the technique of literary juxtaposition or fragment composition has its own lineage in the German Romantics. Photomontage techniques were refined by German Dadaists like Hannah Höch, who made an 'immense contribution' to 'the media of collage and photomontage' that 'significantly influenced her contemporaries, the legends of Berlin Dada, from Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader to John Heartfield, George Grosz and Kurt Schwitters'.²⁹ Chapter one demonstrated how the use of photomontage for satirical ends is a feature that ties together *Blather* with the English magazine *Razzle* and German Dadaism. Chapter two also saw the technique of literary juxtaposition applied at a jarring, lexical level, as O'Nolan assembles fragments of the Irish language in his response to *Work in Progress*. This chapter will now develop and discuss the concept of montage as a technique and a political tool in more detail as the thesis turns to that exemplar montage text, *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

²⁷ Brooker, p. 33.

²⁸ Taaffe, 'Tell me this', p. 253.

²⁹ Iwona Blazwick, 'Foreword: The Beauties of Fortuity: Hannah Höch (1889-1978)', in *Hannah Höch* (London: Prestel, 2014), pp. 4-8 (p. 5).

Bürger theorizes the montage technique in German Dada by beginning with the concept of allegory, developed by Walter Benjamin in his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928). Arguing that the idea of allegory is itself a result of Benjamin's encounter with what he describes as the 'avant-gardiste (nonorganic) work of art', and therefore readily applicable to the avant-garde, Bürger describes it as combining 'two production-aesthetic concepts, one of which relates to the treatment of the material (removing elements from a context), the other to the constitution of the work (the joining of fragments and the positing of meaning)'.³⁰ That is to say, allegory for the avant-gardist involves initially 'killing the "life"' of the material, turning it into a 'fragment' and then joining the fragments together with the intention of 'positing meaning (where the meaning may well be the message that meaning has ceased to exist)'.³¹ When a work is composed of these 'reality fragments', its resulting refusal to convey an organic 'impression of wholeness', the appearance of something natural, is how 'the revolutionizing of life by returning art to its praxis turns into a revolutionizing of art'; thus, the avant-gardist work 'proclaims itself as an artificial construct'.³²

In turn, montage is a 'category that permits the more precise definition of a particular aspect of the concept of allegory'.³³ Working in different ways across the media of film (where montage is embedded in the production process itself), versus fine art and literature (where it is a far more contrived step), montage is a technical procedure which, through 'the insertion of reality fragments', deliberately breaks up the organic unity of an artwork and blurs the boundary between artworks and life: 'They are no longer signs pointing to a reality, they *are* reality' (emphasis in original).³⁴ Bürger disagrees with Adorno that the montage procedure has a political significance of its own.³⁵ However, he gives the example of John Heartfield's political

³⁰ Bürger, pp. 70.

³¹ Bürger, p. 70.

³² Bürger, p. 72.

³³ Bürger, p. 73.

³⁴ Bürger, pp. 73, 78.

³⁵ Bürger refers to Adorno's statement (as translated here by Michael Shaw): 'Art wishes to confess its impotence vis-à-vis the late capitalist totality and inaugurate its abolition' in *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. by Gretel Adorno, R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt, 1970) p. 232. Bürger points out that montage was used by the Italian Futurists 'of whom it can hardly be said that they wanted to abolish capitalism, and by Russian avant-gardistes after the October revolution, who were working in a developing socialist

photomontages, such as *Adolph – The Superman – Who Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* (1932), to show how montage can be deployed as a political statement:



Fig. 1 – ‘Adolph – The Superman – Who Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk’ (1932)

Bürger says that these photomontages ‘are not primarily aesthetic objects, but images for reading (*Lesebilder*). Heartfield went back to the old art of the emblem and used it politically’.³⁶ *Blather* shows that O’Nolan is familiar with Heartfield’s style of montage, or at least reveals that the techniques Höch and he pioneered had become widespread by the mid-1930s. O’Nolan also signals his familiarity with montage in Expressionist cinema. On 25 October 1938 a letter to the *Irish Times* by Flann O’Brien mentions montage in response to Seán Ó Faoláin’s threat to ‘go to the

society’ (p. 78). However, Bürger oversimplifies; Robert Hullot-Kentor translates the same passage as: ‘Art wants to admit its powerlessness vis-a-vis late-capitalist totality and to initiate its abrogation. Montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it. The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form. In this, montage unconsciously takes its lead from a nominalistic utopia: one in which the pure facts are mediated by neither form nor concept and irremediably divest themselves of their facticity’ in *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 155.

³⁶ Bürger, pp. 78, 75.

movies the next time he came to town, because they are “at least honest in their vulgarity”. In reply, O’Brien writes:

This makes me laugh.

Surely Mr O Faoláin is out of date in his pose that intellectuals do not go into picture houses. If he came to town oftener he would know that your really high-powered V8 intellectual will not hear of the obsolete theatre, but concerns himself solely with Pabst, Eisenstein, fluidity, montage, new art-form and the rest of the hideous moron’s muck. Could I lend Mr O Faoláin my copy of “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari”? He might manage to lock himself up in it and lose the key. (*L*, p. 17)

Expressionism provides other contexts for *At Swim-Two-Birds* that also make extensive use of montage. Firstly, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929, English translation Eugene Jolas, 1931), a novel by Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) is perhaps the main precursor to *At Swim-Two-Birds* apart from Joyce’s *Ulysses* to make use of inserted texts and tell its story from multiple perspectives (and Benjamin distinguishes it from *Ulysses* as ‘something quite different’ in that the ‘stylistic principle governing the book is that of montage’ in his 1930 essay, ‘The Crisis of The Novel’).³⁷ Richard Murphy, arguing that Expressionist works such as Döblin’s novel exemplify the nonorganic principle which motivates the montage structure of avant-garde works of art, notes how Döblin claims that: ‘If a novel cannot be cut up like a worm into ten pieces so that each bit moves independently it is no good’.³⁸ This principle resonates with *At Swim*’s manifesto for the novel as a ‘self-evident sham’ and ‘largely a work of reference’ which reuses characters from elsewhere (*CN*, p. 21).

Secondly, there is the example of Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* (1929), a play which uses the Expressionistic device of depicting dreams taking place in the mind of a concussed actor playing eighteenth-century Irish nationalist hero Robert Emmet. Johnston’s play, whose influence on O’Nolan is demonstrated and

³⁷ Benjamin, ‘The Crisis of the Novel’, *Selected Writings*, II, pp. 299–304 (p. 301).

³⁸ Original: ‘Wenn in Roman nicht wie en Regenwurm in zehn Stucke geschitten werde kann und jeder Teil bewegt sich selbst dann taugt er nichts’, Alfred Döblin, ‘Bemerkungen zum Roman’, *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, ed. by Walter Muschg (Olten and Freiburg: Walter Verlag, 1963), p. 21, and cited in Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 21. Translated by R. Murphy.

discussed in chapter five, serves to remind us that O’Nolan does not rely exclusively on European sources for his use of montage. Luke Gibbons, referring to the endorsement of montage as a shock to jolt ‘people out of the accumulated habits of tradition, the inertia of the old order’ in Benjamin’s account of Eisenstein and Joyce, makes the point that Ireland’s nineteenth century history already provides a ‘profound sense of catastrophe’ and asks, therefore, whether Irish art requires ‘the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history’?³⁹ In chapter two this thesis made the point that *Buile Shuibhne*, the major medieval source for *At Swim*, is itself already a synthetic composition as a frame narrative to contain many other texts. O’Nolan doesn’t just transplant the montage procedure from international sources; his work acknowledges the historicity of the technique as a mode of critique which is passed down from both the Irish-language tradition and the catastrophes of twentieth-century European history (as discussed in chapter one and chapter six). Neither is he in sole possession of this tactic. In *The Bell*, a feature entitled ‘Mise Eire’ (referring to Patrick Pearse’s 1912 poem and translated as ‘I am Ireland’) compiles press clippings submitted each month to create a comical snapshot of the country.⁴⁰ It is a form of tacit critique through arrangement, wherein the reader is left to draw her own conclusions, just as we encounter in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

We return to that telling turn of phrase in O’Nolan’s letter about the novel to his agent, Heath: ‘it has the ingredients that make the work of writers from this beautiful little island acceptable’ (*L*, p. 6). Now the claim suggests something surgical: a dissection and re-assembly of the novel as a commodity by an expert handler. In Benjamin’s commentary on Baudelaire, he writes of how ‘[more] and more relentlessly, the objective environment of human beings is coming to wear the expression of the commodity. At the same time, advertising seeks to disguise the commodity character of things’; Baudelaire’s poetry provides a countervailing function: ‘What resists the mendacious transfiguration of the commodity world is its distortion into allegory’ and ‘Baudelaire’s enterprise was to make manifest the

³⁹ Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p. 167.

⁴⁰ Such as this clipping from a report of a Muintir na Tíre meeting in the *Irish Times*, ‘Mr. Seamus O’Ferall said that while they had not done anything in Dublin as spectacular as had been done in rural areas, they were convinced that something ought to be done, and were determined to do it as soon as they found out what it was’, followed with this statement by Patrick Kavanagh clipped from an unspecified book review, also for the *Irish Times*, ‘We need some straight information regarding love-making here in Ireland’. Various, ‘Mise Eire’, *The Bell*, 1.4 (January 1941), p. 32.

particular aura of commodities. He sought to humanize the commodity heroically'.⁴¹ In turn, *At Swim* humanizes the book as a commodity: its characters live out the book market's clash of genres and personify its cycle of authors, publishers and readers who, in turn, become authors. In a way which might be compared to Marx's vivid analysis of the commodity in general, *At Swim* explores the contradictions and conflicts of the novel's production process.⁴²

Before probing more deeply how into the Irish book market that *At Swim* uses montage to address, this chapter shall take a short detour by way of what is proposed as another important context: the satirical nineteenth-century fragment aesthetics of Heinrich Heine. The next section explores the evidence for the influence of Heine's *Die Harzreise* (*The Harz Journey*, 1826) on the montage technique and satire of *At Swim*, with the aim of demonstrating the double sense of the pathological explored above: Heine's representation of Goethe's mediation by popular culture in Germany can be compared to *At Swim*'s satire of Joycean Dublin and its celebration of the Irish material culture that conservative critics fret over.

3.4. Heine

Heine (1797–1856) was a German-Jewish writer whom Edward Timms describes as 'the greatest satirist of the nineteenth century'.⁴³ He knew Karl Marx, admired Napoleon and veered between radical liberalism and socialism in his politics.⁴⁴ Heine studied under Schlegel in Bonn, attended lectures given by Hegel in Berlin, and wrote about German philosophy for French readers.⁴⁵ He also wrote popular poetry which was set to music by Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Schubert. In his essay, 'Heine and the Consequences', Karl Kraus attacks Heine for creating a style which

⁴¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV, p. 173.

⁴² See 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof' in Karl Marx, *Capital: A new abridgement*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 43–50.

⁴³ Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist*, two vols, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986–2005), I, p. 36.

⁴⁴ There is an affectionate letter from Karl Marx to Heinrich Heine, Paris, January-February 1845, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/letters/45_02_02.htm> [accessed 14 August 2019].

⁴⁵ Heine, *Die Harzreise* (London and Boston: D.C. Heath & Co, 1907), p. vii–viii. For comments on Heine's relationship to Hegel, see Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1975), pp. 313, 462.

reduces language to an interchangeable commodity in the hands of his imitators.⁴⁶ Like O’Nolan’s writing, Heine’s prose also stands in the tradition of picaresque ‘Second Line’ novels and he is strongly influenced by Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) and *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) in this respect.

O’Nolan encounters Heine whilst reading for his undergraduate degree in 1929 and his decision to study German should be viewed in the context of the strong affinities between Ireland and Catholic Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. In his essay on the inter-relationship between Germany and Ireland in this period, Joachim Fischer explains how successful Catholic political consolidation in areas of German such as the Rhineland and Bavaria drew Irish Revivalists towards those parts of the country, as Irish clerics ‘constructed Catholic Germany as a model for Ireland to follow’.⁴⁷ O’Nolan’s own interest in this area is indicated both by the itinerary for his trip to Germany in 1936, when he has his passport stamped in Cologne (part of the Rhineland), and perhaps also by the Bavarian ring of a tale he told to *Time* magazine in 1943 about being ‘beaten up and bounced out of a beer hall for uncomplimentary references to Adolf Hitler’.⁴⁸

The Heine text on O’Nolan’s undergraduate reading list is *Die Harzreise* or *The Harz Journey*, published in the first volume of Heine’s *Reisebilder* (*Pictures of Travel*) in 1826. We learn about this book in *At Swim* when the narrator refers to it in the second ‘*biographical reminiscence*’ in a dialogue with his uncle reproduced below. In the same way as *At Swim*’s narrator, Heine himself depended on an uncle for patronage. In his case, however, the uncle was a Hamburg multimillionaire named Salomon rather than a holder of a ‘Guinness clerkship the third class’ (CN, p. 6).⁴⁹

Could you give me five shillings to buy a book, please?

Five shillings? Well, dear knows it must be a great book altogether that can cost five shillings. What do they call it?

⁴⁶ Karl Kraus, ‘Heine and the Consequences’ in *The Kraus Project*, ed. by Paul Reitter and Daniel Kehlmann, trans. by Jonathan Franzen (London: The Fourth Estate, 2013), pp. 3–134.

⁴⁷ Joachim Fischer, “‘Kultur - and Our Need of It’: The Image of Germany and Irish National Identity, 1890-1920”, *The Irish Review*, 24 (1999), 66–79 (p. 75).

⁴⁸ BC, 24; Anon., ‘Eire’s Columnist’, *Time*, 23 August 1943, 29–30 (p. 30).

⁴⁹ Heinrich Heine, *Selected Prose*, trans. and ed. by Ritchie Robinson (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 2.

Die Harzreise by Heine, I answered.

Dee... ?

Die Harzreise, a German book.

I see, he said.

His head was bent, his two eyes engaged on a meticulous observation of the activities of his knife and fork as they dissected between them a fried haddock. Suddenly disengaging his right hand, he dipped in his waistcoat and put two half-crowns on the tablecloth.

After a time, he said:

So long as the book is used, well and good. So long as it is read and studied, well and good. (CN, p. 29)

As we subsequently learn from two further references in passages transcribed into the manuscript from conversations with Sheridan, who is portrayed as ‘Brinsley’, the narrator doesn’t buy the book and instead spends the five shillings, either by placing a bet on a horse or on pints of stout in ‘Grogan’s licensed premises’ (CN, p. 34). When, a few pages later, the narrator is ‘on worse terms than ever’ with his uncle, it is his ‘continued failure to produce for his examination a book called *Die Harzreise*’ which is ‘a sore point’ (CN, p. 40). By these means the influence of *Die Harzreise*, beyond the five shillings it is worth, is signalled but then effaced in the primary frame narrative. However, the traces of Heine are everywhere in *At Swim*.

The textual evidence that O’Nolan did read *Die Harzreise* is first assembled by Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin in his 1997 essay, ‘Comparatively Untapped Sources’. Ó Brolcháin writes that ‘we find that it contains exactly the kind of boozy, footloose university student’s reminiscence with which we have become so dreadfully familiar’. The markers of influence include: a journeyman tailor ‘addicted to poetry but with only a hazy notion of metre’ whom Ó Brolcháin compares to Jem Casey; an account of a character ‘obsessed by the colour green’ like Trellis, who only reads books with green covers; a German athlete named Lüder with a prodigious ability for jumping who can be compared to the Irish national reputation for being ‘good jumpers’ in *At Swim* (CN, p 82); and a ceiling which threatens to fall in.⁵⁰ Mostly these examples refer to *Die Harzreise*’s early pages, which is perhaps a sign of O’Nolan’s waning

⁵⁰ Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin, ‘Comparatively Untapped Sources’, pp. 12–13. See Heine, *Selected Prose*, pp. 40, 37, 33, 39.

concentration on a work which, with his undergraduate German, would have been taxing to read.

There is another indication of Heine's significance in O'Nolan's copy of *Die Harzreise*, dated 1930. Throughout, he adds translations of certain phrases into Irish or English but otherwise there are no notes or observations. One of the translations is more substantial. *Die Harzreise* begins by quoting a famous epigraph written by Heine's contemporary and rival, the radical German-Jewish journalist Ludwig Börne, who Heine subjected to an ill-conceived book-length critical attack after his death. In modern translation, the epigraph reads as follows:

Nothing is permanent but change; nothing is constant but change; nothing is constant but death. Every heartbeat inflicts a wound upon us, and life would be a perpetual process of bleeding to death, were it not for poetry. It grants us what Nature denies us: a golden age that does not rust, a spring that does not fade, cloudless happiness and everlasting youth.⁵¹

O'Nolan translates a part of this epigraph into Irish (some of the characters are unclear):

Ní'l aon nidh buan acht an t-athrú; ní'l aon nidh seasmhach acht an bás.
Ghuidh (?) gach aon buille de chuid an chroidhe sinn a ghonadh, agus ach go bé (?) an fhilidheacht, ní bheadh sa bheatha acht an dortú-fola-um(?)-báis

Retranslated into English, one could render O'Nolan's Irish version as follows:

⁵¹ Heinrich Heine, *Die Harzreise* (London: D. C. Heath & Company, 1889) in Boston College, John J. Burns Library, Flann O'Brien Collection 1881–1991, MS 1997–027, p. 1. Translated in Heine, *Selected Prose*, p. 30, with footnote: 'Börne, 'Memorial Oration for Jean Paul' (1825) by Ludwig Börne (1786–1837), the German-Jewish radical journalist who was later the subject of a contentious book by Heine (*Ludwig Börne: A Memorial*, 1840). Jean Paul Richter (1763–1825) was a very popular humorous novelist whose convoluted and allusive style was probably one model for Heine's' (Heine, *Selected Prose*, p. 339).

There is nothing permanent but change; there is nothing constant but death.
Every beat of the heart bestows a wound on us, and but for poetry, there
would be nothing in life but the blood-pouring of death.⁵²

We see that the undergraduate O’Nolan focuses on how Börne turns the Heraclitean sense of being as perpetual change into a morbid realization that life is inter-related with death, choosing not to translate the exaltation of poetry as a source of permanence. As was discussed in relation to the violent events of ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’, O’Nolan is drawn to figures and ideas that associate literary creativity with bodily injury and death. This bittersweet epigraph seems to have influenced the selection of *At Swim*’s own Greek epigraph, which translates as ‘all things change, making way for each other’ (CN, p. 3) and the sequence of axioms in the book’s ‘ultimate’ conclusion (CN, pp. 215-217). The attention that O’Nolan gives to the Börne epigraph with this translation adds credence to a connection that Maebh Long has drawn between the aesthetic of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which she characterizes as a ‘mode of fragmentation’, and the philosophy of Schlegel and others associated with the German *Athenaeum* journal (1798-1800).⁵³ This line of influence makes sense when we consider, as Gibbons points out, that German Romanticism ‘greatly influenced’ Irish cultural nationalism, a scholarly variety of which runs through O’Nolan’s family background (as Ó Conaire has documented).⁵⁴

Fragment aesthetics flow from a Romantic-era focus on the materiality of literary objects when they are considered in the fullness of their existence, from production to consumption, transmission and disintegration: ‘As the totality that the fragments created was always open and changing’, Long writes, ‘what was prioritized was not the creation of a static finished artefact, but instead the act of production – poiesis itself’.⁵⁵ The contingencies of this method are expounded by Heine himself in one of the closing passages of *Die Harzreise*, when Heine’s narrator admits that:

⁵² Thank-you to Eoin Byrne for reviewing my transcription and re-translating it back into English.

⁵³ Long, pp. 30–31.

⁵⁴ Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p. 78; Breandan Ó Conaire, ‘Brian Ó Nualláin/O’Nolan: Scholarly Background and Foreground’, *Parish Review*, 4.1 (Spring 2018), 4–16.

⁵⁵ Long, p. 13.

The Harz Journey is and remains a fragment, and the colourful threads so prettily woven into it to form a harmonious whole are suddenly cut off, as though by the shears of inexorable Fate. Perhaps I shall continue weaving them in future songs, and what is now left in meagre silence will then be said in full. In the long run it does not matter when and where something is uttered, so long as it is uttered. Individual works may remain fragments, so long as they form a whole when put together.⁵⁶

Heine's defence of his unfinished text rebuts the demand for organic unity in narratives, particularly narratives of personal development. Repositioning his 'colourful threads' as elements of a song and perhaps of 'future songs', he endorses the view of Börne in the opening epigraph that, since neither life nor literature will cohere into a unitary whole, prose must succumb to the contingencies of poetic production. The only thing which can endure is a fragment and these fragments can only be made to 'form a whole' by arrangement.

The montage structure of *At Swim*, its 'mode of fragmentation', can therefore be traced back through twentieth-century montage techniques to German Romantic satirists such as Heine and Börne. The Romantic interest in technologies of visual reproduction also directly anticipates avant-garde experiments with photomontage. Heine proposed the new photographic technology of the 'daguerreotype as a model of his journalism' and noted that '[the] daguerreotype represents the fly as well as it does the noblest horse'.⁵⁷ The connection to Börne and Heine validates Long's suggestion that 'the mode of fragmentation that O'Brien uses in *At Swim* can be seen to be a modernist reworking of the German Romantic Fragment'.⁵⁸ Furthermore, since these figures are both Romantics and satirists, this line of influence also explains something that isn't readily apparent from the way that Long makes the connection: the overtly satirical ends to which fragment aesthetics and the montage technique are put in *At Swim*. This connection is also conceptualized by Stinson in his recent *Satirizing Modernism*, where Stinson traces 'avant-garde satires of the avant-garde' such as *At Swim* back to the idea of the 'postromantic satire' which emerges within late Romanticism as a precursor to the avant-garde; the 'postromantic satire' is

⁵⁶ Heine, *Selected Prose*, p. 84.

⁵⁷ Phelan, pp. 44-45.

⁵⁸ Long, p. 11.

a term Stinson applies to Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) and which can readily be applied to *Die Harzreise*.⁵⁹

It is their comic focus on the materiality and fragmentary nature of the printed text that enables both *Die Harzreise* and *At Swim* to function as microcosms of the book markets of their respective periods. For example, Heine's travel narrative is not only a Goethean parody – closely mirroring the journey of Faust and Mephistopheles in *Faust Part One* when Heine's narrator leaves the university town of Göttingen and follows the *Goetheweg* trail up the Brocken mountain – but also a smorgasbord of German print culture, mixing its constant references to Goethe with allusions to both highbrow and popular literature, including: E.T.A. Hoffman (1776-1822), Romantic author of *The Sandman*, *The Golden Pot* and others; the *Austrian Observer*; a book-seller, Saul Ascher; the Dresden literary paper the *Evening News*; the plays of Schiller and Shakespeare; Cervantes; and popular tragedies or operas like *Hatred and Penitences* and *Spontini's Janissary Opera*. In doing so, Heine's text accretes more and more images of Germany or the typical German as represented by the books they buy: the 'crazy German', 'the German bard', the 'German national tragedy of Dr. Faustus'. Even the Brocken mountain itself 'is entirely German, both in its weaknesses and its strengths'.⁶⁰ Just as in *At Swim*, the apriority of representation and world is repeatedly confused to comic effect. For example, the narrator encounters a drunken student who is 'of the opinion that Germany should be divided into thirty-three districts or Gauen. I maintained, however, that it should be forty-eight, because one could then write a more methodical handbook on Germany'.⁶¹ Heine's technique of assembling a pluralized Germany from these fragments overwhelms essentialist visions of the imagined nation, yet without effacing its German-ness. The metaleptic consequences of such an operation are an important precursor to the montage aesthetics of *At Swim* and its own ambivalent celebration of a fragmented Irish culture.

3.5. The Irish book market

When the reviewer of *At Swim* for the *Times Literary Supplement* writes that it has 'all but exhausted, with the exercise of much ingenuity, the subject of Irish content and

⁵⁹ Stinson, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Heine, *Selected Prose*, pp. 40, 73, 66, 67.

⁶¹ Heine, *Selected Prose*, p. 73.

Irish style', he or she may have in mind the fact that what might be described as a crisis in the Irish novel is a leitmotif of Irish literary discussion throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁶² It seems at this time to many writers that the Revival, so prolific in verse and drama, has not bestowed useable models for the novel. This concern is underpinned by a pathological view of small-town Ireland as venal, debased and unsuitable for the construction of an Irish national culture. For example, in a representative essay of 1941, Seán Ó Faoláin wrote that, in contrast to verse and drama, 'there has never been any literary doctrine for Irish prose', and suggested that

while the Irish novelist, in common with every novelist, thus works in the Flaubertian studio, it is in his nature – which makes him both rich and poor – to hanker after that renounced symbolism and those regretted worlds of the mind.⁶³

Echoing Sheridan's praise of Kafka (which is dealt with in chapter four) Ó Faoláin argues that it is only the 'anti-naturalistic books' that have excited the Irish writer: 'Kafka's; all the Russians, but, alone satisfyingly and permanently, Chekhov; one or two books by Catholic Frenchmen, such as Duhamel and Mauriac; a play like Obey's "Noah"; a Giraudoux or two'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Ó Faoláin's own 'literary doctrine' must resolve itself into one of naturalism:

The Irish novelist, in a society that may be crazy but is conscious, is thus driven back to objectivity, reproduction, almost to photography. He must depict the fact, or his comment, his Chekhovian judgment, will be unjust. For all comment on life is on life as it is felt, seen, heard, smelled by those who live it [...] Intensely as he may dislike naturalism, he has to use it.⁶⁵

The Irish novelist, though drawn to fantasy and symbolism by birthright, must resort to naturalistic realism and 'depict the fact' in order to respond sincerely to this

⁶² Anon., 'Nest of Novelists', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 March 1939, cited in *Alive-Alive O!*, p. 43.

⁶³ Sean Ó Faoláin, 'Ah, Wish! The Irish Novel', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 17.2 (Spring 1941), <<http://www.vqronline.org/essay/ah-wisha-irish-novel>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

⁶⁴ Ó Faoláin, 'Ah, Wish! The Irish Novel'.

⁶⁵ Ó Faoláin, 'Ah, Wish! The Irish Novel'.

situation. Earlier, in 1934, Ó Faoláin addresses a similar theme in his article, 'Plea for a New Type of Novel', but reaches a different conclusion. There he criticizes the naturalistic 'analysis of character' as a tendency that has 'gone too far in literature' stemming from a 'materialist approach to life and man', and includes Joyce in this category, criticizing him as a 'subjectivist' whose work leads only to 'disintegration without added significance'.⁶⁶ At that time, Ó Faoláin had only just returned to Ireland to teach at a Christian Brothers' School in Ennis, County Clare after spending three years teaching at Harvard and then working at a Catholic college in Middlesex, England.⁶⁷ From the contrast between the two viewpoints, it might be concluded that in the intervening period between this and 'Ah, wishal' in 1941, Ó Faoláin's experience of what he describe as a 'dreary Eden' convinces him of the necessity of a naturalism that turns a critical eye on the deficiencies of the national character. He is not alone in this conclusion. Terence Brown argues that Ireland

for O'Connor, for Austin Clarke and for O Faoláin, was not the land 'the poets imagined / Terrible and gay' but a country where the novelist's realistic eye, the satirist's scalpel, seemed the only appropriate literary equipment to deal with its drab, unromantic actuality.⁶⁸

Ó Faoláin, as these articles suggest, struggled with the novel as a form to express his ideas. Instead, he achieved most success with long-form non-fiction like *The Beggar King* and much of his output – alongside his major journalistic contribution, *The Bell* – consists of short stories in which the depiction of plot and character is directed at evoking 'universal themes' or, as he once put it, 'moments of awareness when we know three truths at one and the same time'.⁶⁹ Brown cites Ó Faoláin's conclusion in 1949, after writing three novels himself, that the Irish novel is not sustained by its subject matter:

⁶⁶ Sean Ó Faoláin, 'Plea for a New Type of Novel', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 10.2 (Spring 1934), <<http://www.vqronline.org/essay/plea-new-type-novel>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

⁶⁷ Maurice Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1984), p. xix.

⁶⁸ Terence Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988), p. 94, citing W. B. Yeats, 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 368.

⁶⁹ Harmon, pp. 62–63. Perhaps this owes something to Joyce's use of epiphany in *Dubliners*.

In such an unshaped society there are many subjects for little pieces, that is for the short-story writer; the novelist or the dramatist loses himself in the general amorphism, unthinkingness, brainlessness, egalitarianism and general unsophistication.⁷⁰

Ó Faoláin's view that Irish petit-bourgeois existence could not provide adequate subject matter for imaginative literature is a form of pathological cultural criticism. These ideas have shaped an understanding of post-independence Ireland as parochial, inward-looking and hostile to the literary movements it had brought forth before independence. As we shall see, *At Swim* usefully complicates this image.

James Devane was a Catholic commentator whose 1936 essay, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?', made an innovative foray into this debate by taking the crisis which Ó Faoláin diagnoses in the Irish novel, reframing that crisis in the context of the marketplace and tacitly linking it to the 'buy Irish' sentiments of pre- and post-independence Irish economic nationalism.⁷¹ The non-existence of an Irish home market for the novel, which presupposes an Irish novel-purchasing public, had rendered the Irish novel 'not possible', he argues. A nation must have a national literature but there are not enough people who read serious literature in Ireland to cover the costs of its production. Instead, writers must turn to addressing the far larger English market, and as a result, 'an Irish novel is not possible today'.⁷² In a chapter on Irish publishing in the fifth volume of the *Oxford History of the Irish Book*, Nicholas Allen and Terence Brown provide evidence to suggest that there is a certain validity to Devane's argument. The Irish book market was dominated by foreign imports: 'The Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland, which held their annual convention in Dublin in 1930, reckoned that only 3% of all books available in Ireland were published there'.⁷³ The home market for books was small and Irish

⁷⁰ Brown, *Ireland's Literature*, p. 99, quoting Sean O'Faolain, 'The Dilemma of Irish Letters', *The Month*, 2.6 (1949), p. 373.

⁷¹ See Chapter 1, 'Advertising and the Nation in the Irish Revival' in John Strachan and Claire Nally, *Advertising, Literature and Print Culture in Ireland, 1891–1922* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 37–58.

⁷² James Devane, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?', *Ireland To-day*, 1.5 (October 1936), 21–31 (p. 23).

⁷³ Nicholas Allen and Terence Brown, 'Publishing after Partition, 1922–39' in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book, Vol 5: 1891–2000*, ed. by Clare Hutton, Patrick Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 70–88 (p. 84).

publishers in the Free State period, without access to the same distribution networks as London publishers, had no choice but to steer clear of subject matter that might not sell or which might invite libel and censorship. Instead ‘publishers profited from strict identification with specific markets. Schoolbooks, prayer books, romances, and Westerns were the staple of such profitable businesses as there were’.⁷⁴ A chapter by Frank Shovlin in the same volume observes that ‘[while] a hunger for books on Ireland and all things Irish was unique to the Irish reader, the huge popularity of light romance, detective novels, and tales of the Wild West made Ireland just like every other country in the English-speaking world’.⁷⁵ Shovlin also notes that Clive Bloom ‘in his study of the best-seller in Britain has convincingly argued that the growth of Wild-West fiction went hand in hand with the emergence of cinema and Hollywood’s particular fascination with the cowboy as hero’.⁷⁶

In James Joyce’s short story, ‘An Encounter’, the unnamed narrator is obsessed by comics about the Wild West with titles like ‘*The Union Jack*, *Pluck* and *The Halfpenny Marvel*’; he is rebuked for reading ‘this wretched stuff’ by his teacher, Father Butler, who supposes the author of these tales is ‘some wretched fellow who writes these things for a drink’.⁷⁷ The dominance of imported print culture in Ireland also explains why Trellis, who only reads books with green covers, ‘[for] many years experienced a difficulty in obtaining a sufficiency of books to satisfy his active and inquiring mind, for the green colour was not favoured by the publishers of London’ (CN, p. 97). Tony Farmar reinforces these points by citing Bryan MacMahon’s 1941 article in *The Bell* about the popular books borrowed via a commercial lending library service, Argosy, that he ran from a small bookshop in Listowel, County Kerry:

⁷⁴ Allen and Brown, p. 73, citing this report in *The Irish Book Lover*, 18.4 (July–August 1930), 97: ‘The conference held in Dublin early in July of the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland brings home to all interested in books the very dependent position occupied by Ireland in the publishing world. Almost 97 per cent. of the books available through the book trade in Ireland is the product of English Publishing Houses, and is printed in England or Scotland. Even that rare bird – the successful Irish author – is for the most part printed and published abroad’.

⁷⁵ Frank Shovlin, ‘From Tucson to Television: Irish Reading, 1939-69’ in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book, Vol 5: 1891-2000*, pp. 128–51 (p. 147).

⁷⁶ Shovlin, pp. 148–49, citing Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 35.

⁷⁷ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1926), pp. 18–19.

Popular Irish authors were Maurice Walsh (a local man), Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell; the stock in light romantic fiction, such as Anne Duffield, Mary Burchell and Kathleen Norris were 'the real money-spinners'. The Western novel also had 'an amazing grip' on the rural reading public.⁷⁸

MacMahon enjoyed his experience. Dermot Foley, who was Clare County Librarian at the time, describes the situation in bleaker terms, blaming official and unofficial censorship for degraded standards in the book-reading public. In a 1974 article he complains that '[my] library was whipped into serving up an Irish stew of imported westerns, sloppy romances, blood-and-murders bearing the *nihil obstat* (no objection) of fifty-two vigilantes, and anything escaping them was lying in unread bundles on the shelves of musty halls and schools'.⁷⁹

It's clear from these accounts that the imported material reflected popular genres across the English-speaking world: westerns, romances and crime. A more specific example of the writing that appealed to Irish audiences (as noted by MacMahon) is Maurice Walsh, a bestselling Irish novelist who spends his working life in the Civil Service as a Customs and Excise officer before turning to full-time writing (resembling in this way the career of O'Nolan's father and of O'Nolan himself). Walsh's 'breakthrough' short story, 'The Quiet Man' (1933), earns him \$2,000 when published in the American magazine the *Saturday Evening Post* and, as discussed by Gibbons, is adapted into a 1952 film by John Ford of the same name. Walsh's stories offer American and Irish readers tense yet bucolic romantic narratives centred around the struggle for independence and its aftermath, with 'feared leaders of IRA flying columns fraternizing on the most cordial terms with British army officers' and characters like Owen Jordan, 'doctor to the Flying Column, Irish-American and the son of a Fenian'.⁸⁰ As Gibbons discusses, the 'personal duels' which resolve stories like 'The Quiet Man' resonate with the 'narrative formula of

⁷⁸ Farmar, paragraph 17.5, citing an article in the *The Bell*, 1.6 (March 1941).

⁷⁹ Dermot Foley, "A Minstrel Boy with a Satchel of Books", *Irish University Review*, 4.2 (Autumn 1974), p. 210, cited by Shovlin, p. 150.

⁸⁰ Luke Gibbons, *The Quiet Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 24–25; Maurice Walsh, *The Quiet Man and Other Stories* (Victoria: Reading Essentials, 1993), Kindle edition, loc 15 (first pub. as *Green Rushes* by London: W. R Chambers, 1935)

westerns'.⁸¹ The popularity of Walsh's romances, which sentimentally and obliquely relate the violence of the Irish war of independence to the Irish experience in America, offer a glimpse into the literary imagination of Irish readers (and their American counterparts) in the 1930s and 1940s.

But what about books written and published in Ireland? Farmar also summarizes the titles that were introduced by Irish publishers and remained in print during the period of 1938–1944, based on figures from the Book Association of Ireland:

*Table 1 - Irish-published books 1938–44 by assigned class*⁸²

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>%</i>
Religious	77	20
Philosophy, sociology	26	6.5
Biography & history	75	19
Poetry & belles-lettres	59	15
Fiction	53	13.5
Plays	46	12
Children	6	1.5
Travel	6	1.5
Miscellaneous	42	11
TOTAL	390	100

Farmar cautions that these figures under-represent 'religious' books by putting some of them in the philosophy and biography categories: really, at least a third of the titles had 'explicit Catholic religious content'.⁸³ He also notes that:

'Miscellaneous' is a wide-ranging set including *Irish Without Worry*, *Acts and Orders Relating to Death Duties*, *The Practical Bee Guide* and the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, which was of course a periodical. The 'Fiction' total includes 19

⁸¹ Gibbons, *The Quiet Man*, p. 25.

⁸² Farmar, paragraph 17.64.

⁸³ Farmar, paragraph 17.63.

reprints of Anne M.P. Smithson titles and ‘Plays’ includes 13 by Sinéad de Valera.⁸⁴

Although the figures are not directly comparable, by placing the small number of titles brought out in Ireland next to the records that show 560,973 actual books were imported from Britain in 1938, we start to see just how tiny and eclectic the native Irish book publishing market was in the late 1930s and 1940s. To talk of the underdevelopment of the literary Irish novel as a social and cultural problem seems unfair; the economics of British preponderance ruled it out as a market category in its own right. Accordingly, Allen and Brown suggest that ‘[the] younger generation published elsewhere’ and, for literary writers, London was not only a preferable place to find a publisher but often the only option as Irish firms backed away from books that might invite libel or censorship. Even ‘Sean O’Casey had his Abbey plays returned by [Ireland’s principal publisher] Talbot because [its proprietor] Lyon felt they would not sell’.⁸⁵ Like the work of writers including Samuel Beckett, Kate O’Brien and Frank O’Connor, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is published in London.

Yet, despite these challenges and as Farmar’s table shows, the Irish publication of literary work is by no means impossible. It is perhaps significant that *The Third Policeman* is rejected by the English publisher Longman and that O’Nolan’s subsequent three books are published by Irish companies (*An Béal Bocht* by the National Press in 1941; the 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* anthology and *Faustus Kelly* by Cahill & Company in 1943). Irish poets writing in English did not necessarily need to turn to London to find publishers. As discussed in chapter two, they are consistently published in Irish little magazines like *Ireland To-day*. Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* was published in Dublin by Cuala Press in 1942. Irish poems also regularly feature in the *Irish Times* as part of a ‘Books of the Week’ section edited by Donagh MacDonagh.⁸⁶ These are collected in an edition, *Poems from Ireland*, published by the *Irish Times* in 1944, which includes three of O’Nolan’s translations published as Myles na cGopaleen, poems by A. J. Leventhal and Niall Sheridan, along with modernist poetry by F. R. Higgins, Francis Stuart, Frank O’Connor and Louis MacNeice.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Farmar, paragraph 17.64.

⁸⁵ Allen and Brown, pp. 87, 84.

⁸⁶ O’Brien, *The Irish Times: A History*, p. 125.

⁸⁷ MacDonagh (ed), *Poems from Ireland*, pp. 66–77, 46, 83, 31–37, 86, 68–70, 63.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Seán Ó Ríordáin, the major Irish-language modernists, also publish their work in Ireland. Novels like *An Béal Bocht* (1941) and *Cré na Cille* (1949) are not only ‘possible’ in Ireland, they are hardly possible anywhere else.

Although Devane has a point insofar as the rewards for publishing literary work in Ireland are not substantial – O’Nolan’s letters show that he earns just under £40 in royalties for the sale of 1,950 copies of *An Béal Bocht* (L, p. 145), far from an adequate income – he ignores these nuances in the Irish book publishing market and the eclecticism of the genres which did succeed. This enables Devane to substantiate his claim that Ireland’s identity is being undermined by culture imported from England and America, leaving no room for the development of an authentic Irish identity. In reply, *At Swim* is a montage construction of the books which do sell well in Ireland, an interplay of imported and native publications, attuned to the ambiguities that made Irish writers like Walsh popular in America, rather than a drily essentialist prescription of what the Irish novel should look like. As such, *At Swim* goes out of its way to assimilate the Irish books that were in fact ‘possible’ by way of its inserted texts and pastiche genres. The markets that prospered, as identified by Allen and Brown, bemoaned by Foley, and confirmed in the material gathered by Farmar, are all well-represented in *At Swim*: educational or instructional ‘schoolbooks’ by the *Conspectus of Arts and Sciences*; the home market for Catholic ‘prayer books’ by the inclusion of Christian Brothers pamphlets; the profitable popularity of ‘romances’ by the plot line involving Sheila, her rape by Trellis and the happy ending she achieves with Lamont; and of ‘Westerns’ by the William Tracy cowboy stories from which Trellis borrows his characters. The relative strength of poetry in Irish book publishing, alongside biography and history, is accounted for by the contest between Finn, Sweeny and Jem Casey and the inclusion of ‘The Shipwreck’ by William Falconer. Even the relatively high proportion of miscellany in Farmar’s table, a product of the tiny overall number of titles published, is represented by the random ephemera which are inserted into the narrative: betting tips, sales letters, and so on. *At Swim*, through its extensive use of the montage procedure, pays homage to a small but vibrant and eclectic publishing marketplace in Ireland.

This homage stands in contrast to the narrow prescriptions of Ireland’s cultural powerbrokers. Taaffe’s *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass* introduces the requirements set out in Aodh de Blácam’s *Gaelic Literature Surveyed* as a central

example of the ‘brand of cultural polemics which provoked O’Nolan’s satire’.⁸⁸ De Blácam (1891–1951), a Sinn Féin and then Fianna Fáil politician, journalist and editor, whose *Gaelic Literature Surveyed* formed part of O’Nolan’s undergraduate syllabus in 1930, did not see why Ireland, with its rich stock of native mythology, could not provide for its own authentic Irish literature.⁸⁹ In 1935 he sets out his formula for such a national literature:

1. Great, central, simple themes
2. A treatment consistent with our own culture [using] ... the full range of Catholic language, imagery, custom ... in themes that are drawn from Catholic life: otherwise the treatment will be out of proportion, and almost certainly false.
3. Language must be subservient to thought and feeling, direct not allusive [...] there must be orthodoxy in moral standards; not for the sake of the appeal to an orthodox people, but because orthodoxy is a radical condition of greatness in every branch of art everywhere.⁹⁰

If Devane’s argument subordinates aesthetics to economics, then de Blácam’s programmatic structural and stylistic requirements for the Irish novel reveal that his proposed national literature is a close corollary for an even broader sense of the body politic from a conservative viewpoint. His definition of healthy prose has more to do with a sense of spiritual hygiene than aesthetic preferences. It is ‘simple’ and ‘direct not allusive’, adhering to naturalistic representation in a way which complements Fianna Fáil’s valorization of a frugal peasantry living within their means, unenticed by foreign imports. Born in London to Ulster Protestants, De Blácam is one representative of a conservative cultural-political complex in Ireland that the young O’Nolan circle satirize and the older O’Nolan contends with throughout his working life as a civil servant and writer. For example, chapter five discusses O’Nolan’s

⁸⁸ Taaffe, p. 46.

⁸⁹ Cathal Ó Hainle ‘Fionn and Suibhne in *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ in Clune and Hurson (eds), *Conjuring Complexities*, pp. 17–36 (p. 19).

⁹⁰ Aodh de Blacam, ‘What do We Owe the Abbey?’, *Irish Monthly*, 63 (1935), 191–200; p. 200. Cited by Susanna Riordan, in ‘The Unpopular Front: Catholic Revival and Irish Cultural Identity, 1932–48’ in Mike Cronin and John M. Regan (eds), *Ireland: The Politics of Independence 1922–49* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), pp. 98–120 (p. 113).

careful correspondence with Ernest Blythe (1889–1975), a revolutionary and politician born to Ulster Protestant parents who was both involved with the far-right Ailtirí na hAiséirghe (Architects of the Resurrection) and a prominent cultural player as manager of the Abbey Theatre, in relation to the Abbey play *Faustus Kelly* which is, the chapter contends, a veiled anti-fascist work. As Eamonn Hughes suggests, the treatment of imported popular culture and the use of sources and literary techniques drawing on a wide range of international influences in *At Swim* should be understood in this politicized context, at a time when prominent political figures often depict foreign cultural influences in pathological terms.⁹¹ It is another point of comparison with *Finnegans Wake*, also published in 1939, which Philippe Sollers describes in 1975 as ‘the most formidably anti-fascist book produced between the two wars’.⁹² Where right-wing European nationalists denounce non-native influences as a form of disease to be expurgated from the body politic, the European avant-garde responds with montage techniques that reveal how those national identities are shifting cultural streams flowing with ancient and modern international influences, rather than static archetypes handed down through the generations.

A pathological prognosis anatomizes the syndromes which weaken a body or body politic in the hope of expunging them and discovering a cure. In this way, the views of Devane and de Blácam betray their interest in the viability of the Irish literary novel to be a manifestation of their belief in the power of novels and the reading public not just to represent a national culture but to determine its path. Reflecting de Blácam’s close involvement in Fianna Fáil politics, which traded on the failure of Fine Gael’s low-deficit, low-taxation policies to encourage industrial growth, he presents the novel as a form of cultural technology to be subordinated to the wider aspirations of the national imaginary as if it were infrastructure or government policy (which is perhaps why, in *Blather*, literary disputes are of equal importance to new bridges and seaports in The O’Blather’s estimation).⁹³ Such texts

⁹¹ Eamonn Hughes, ‘Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, ed. by Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (Bern and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 115–16.

⁹² Philippe Sollers, ‘Joyce & Co’, trans. by Stephen Heath, *Tel Quel*, 64 (1975), 15–16, qtd. in Geert Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo (eds), *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 397.

⁹³ Lee, p. 109. See *Blather*’s cybernetic campaign for an ‘Atlantic deep-water harbour’ in Bettystown: ‘Ever since the good people of Bettystown bade The O’Blather a hearty *céad míle fáilte* when he went

are easier to imagine in newspaper editorials and magazine polemics than to buy on the shelves, and it seems evident that O’Nolan and his collaborators are reading the edicts from de Blácam with no small degree of amusement. His prescription is precisely what is satirized in the lost novel reportedly attempted by this circle in the early 1930s. Critics often cite, from Sheridan’s account, that this was to be ‘first masterpiece of the Ready-Made or Reach-Me-Down School’ – a novel inspired by Ford’s production lines, an assemblage of material which, as Sheridan’s account runs, eventually turned out to be *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, it’s less often mentioned that the result of this process was to be something very different from the collage effects of *At Swim. Children of Destiny*, in Sheridan’s account, is no avant-garde work of this order, but instead a mutated cliché of an imagined Irish novel in the mould that de Blácam sets out. Sheridan describes the plan for the novel at length:

The great saga (working title: *Children of Destiny*) would deal with the fortunes of an Irish family over a period of almost a century, starting in 1840. It would illuminate a whole panorama of social and political history – the Famine Years, faction fights, evictions, lecherous landlords and modest maidens, emigration, the horrors of the coffin ships, etc., etc.

In America, a member of the family would rise through ward politics and Tammany Hall to the political heights, returning to Ireland to fight in the 1916 Rising, and dying gallantly (in full public view) – the last man to leave the burning ruins of the General Post Office. His son, graduating from politics to high finance, would become the first Irish-American Catholic President of the United States.

Brian proposed that he, Devlin, MacDonagh and I should write the book in sections and then stick the pieces together in a committee [...]

A vast market was ready and waiting. Compulsory education had produced millions of semi-literates, who were partial to a ‘good read’. So it

there to recuperate after his illness in 1924, BLATHER has had its eye on Bettystown. Only for five minutes was the BLATHER eye taken off Bettystown in those ten long years, and that was for two minutes in 1932, when the eye was moved up eight miles to watch the first train crossing the reconstructed viaduct over the Boyne at Drogheda. Nothing happened; the structure held and the eye was immediately refixed on Bettystown’. ‘Whither Bettystown? Progress or Decay? Our Stern Attitude’, *Blather*, 1.2 (October 1942), 36.

must be a big book, weighing at least two-and-a-half pounds. We must give them length without depth, splendour without style. Existing works would be plundered wholesale for material, and the ingredients of the saga would be mainly violence, patriotism, sex, religion, politics and the pursuit of money and power.

This plot, which includes the election of the first Irish pope, Patrick I, and his death by heart-attack at an 'All-Ireland Football Final', is both a sensationalist projection of the patriotic Irish imagination stitched together from pre-existing materials, and a knowing exaggeration of real circumstances: MacDonagh's father, after all, is one the heroes of the Easter Rising. The putative novel's 'great, central, simple themes' and Catholic wish-fulfilment mark it out as a satirical response to de Blácam's formula.⁹⁴

This project indicates the circle's interest in blurring the boundaries between the scene of a novel's reproduction as a commodity and the circumstances of its original production by the writer. The prank poses the question of whether or not any individual author can be immune from the requirements of a collectivized commercial machine influencing his or her own creative processes. In Kraus and Adorno's reading of Heine it is the autonomous potentiality of language itself, specifically the cliché, which provides the vehicle for such a feedback mechanism.⁹⁵ In this respect, it is clear that O'Nolan, who collects and anatomizes clichés in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, is fascinated by the idea of making portable products out of pre-existing language objects, of dividing in two the agencies of the speaker and the spoken word. The very best clichés could be treated like a reliable construction material, 'a prepared, ready-made language' as Adorno describes it.⁹⁶ The O'Nolan circle demonstrates this design principle, according to Sheridan, by developing 'The All-Purpose Opening Speech', an oration suitable for any occasion, which they agreed to translate into multiple languages.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', pp. 43–44.

⁹⁵ See Tobias Harris, 'The Catastrophe of Cliché', p. 8.

⁹⁶ Theodor Adorno, 'Heine the Wound', *Notes to Literature*, I, p. 81.

⁹⁷ Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', p. 40.

3.6. Conclusion

As Taaffe writes, by '[depicting] the various fortunes of revivalist translations, Joycean modernism, and the cowboy western among its readers, [*At Swim*] banishes the illusion of national community and replaces it with a more authentic portrait of a fragmented literary culture'.⁹⁸ One contemporary European context to draw on here is the work of Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), the Frankfurt School thinker who, like Adorno in his orientation but unlike him in his conclusions, is intensely interested in the meanings of popular culture. In his published collection, *The Mass Ornament*, he includes a 1931 article entitled 'On Bestsellers and Their Audience':

a major book success is [...] the *sign of a successful sociological experiment*, proof that elements have once again been blended in such a way as to correspond to the taste of the anonymous mass of readers. The success of a particular book can be explained only by the needs of these readers, who greedily devour certain components while decisively rejecting others. (emphasis in original)⁹⁹

For Kracauer, examining successful books becomes a way of reading the desires of alienated middle-class consciousness at a given moment and, therefore, a window into the social dynamics of a market society. Accordingly, we might say that O'Nolan parallels Kracauer's investigations into mass culture with fiction which, as Tom Walker describes it, constitutes 'a response to the textual as well as the actual Ireland'.¹⁰⁰ The characters of *At Swim* live inside the contingencies thrown up by the Irish book market. They obey, as Kraus observes of Heine's style, an economic rather than a literary logic.¹⁰¹ It is an Irish novel by means of representing the materiality of Irish print culture, rather than its idealized image. Heine's suggestion that Germany should be redivided into forty-eight districts to make it easier to print a handbook about the country, at a time when Germany is being reorganized by the

⁹⁸ Taaffe, 'Tell me this', p. 254.

⁹⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 91.

¹⁰⁰ Tom Walker, "'A True Story': *The Third Policeman* and the writing of terror' in Borg, Fagan & McCourt (eds), *Contesting Legacies*, pp. 126–142 (p. 135).

¹⁰¹ Kraus, 'Heine and the Consequences', p. 59.

Napoleonic wars, evokes the status of *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a textual territory: a heterogeneous Ireland which is represented by means of its printed works, whether those are modernist novels, medieval poetry or pamphlets and textbooks.

Rather than viewing *At Swim* as a postmodernist breakthrough, this thesis argues that O’Nolan’s methods are informed by the widespread adoption of montage techniques which are developed to their greatest degree in visual and literary arts by German Dadaism. The aesthetic gestures of Dada, together with its precedents in Russian and Italian Futurism, are not primarily formalist but bound up with revolutionary politics: the European avant-garde breaks up classical forms in an effort to break apart the ‘established semiotic contracts’ of the bourgeois establishment.¹⁰² Eamonn Hughes, who argues for a reading of *At Swim* as an anti-fascist work, locates the novel amidst ‘three cultural (in its broadest sense) issues of concern’.¹⁰³ These consist of ‘the relationship between modernity and tradition; the choice between fantasy (broadly the idealism of the revival, but also the textual strategies of modernism) and realism [...] and the ownership and control of culture’.¹⁰⁴ Put simply, this last question is that of whether an ‘elite’ should ‘be allowed to prescribe and proscribe cultural activity and practice, or should the “masses” be allowed to go their own way?’¹⁰⁵ *At Swim*, positioned in the contested zone in the middle of each of these three issues, is an attempt to do what eludes other writers: an Irish novel which takes into account the true complexities of Ireland’s cultural inheritance and economic realities. We can read *At Swim* as a response to Ó Faoláin’s ‘Plea for a New Type of Novel’, a novel which negotiates a solution to his wavering between naturalism and fantasy by placing both in a comic mode – and thereby suggesting that this very lightness of touch is what Ó Faoláin’s work is missing.

¹⁰² Eysteinsson, p. 7.

¹⁰³ Hughes, p. 117.

¹⁰⁴ Hughes, p. 117.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, p. 117.

Chapter 4 - *The Third Policeman* and Kafka

4.1. Introduction

The writing of Franz Kafka is not included in the category of the avant-garde as defined by Bürger (nor would he fit into the schema of named movements which is used by Poggioli) and, since his work's incorporation into early New Critical anthologies, Kafka has evolved into a canonical figure of modernism.¹ However, Kafka's writing is also closely associated with Expressionism and, as mentioned in relation to the question of the avant-garde and aesthetic autonomy in the introduction, Richard Murphy makes a strong case for Expressionism (and Kafka within it) as more characteristic of the avant-garde than of modernism. He writes that the Expressionist writers Alfred Döblin, Gottfried Benn and Kafka

are clearly linked primarily to the historical avant-garde rather than to modernism as a whole by their fundamental questioning of the 'dominant social discourses,' the ideological and epistemological premises of conventional concepts of rationality and subjectivity which the institution of art supports.²

As part of his re-evaluation of the concept of modernism, Eysteinsson also places Kafka squarely within the avant-garde because of the centrality of the 'collage effect' to his fiction and its '(ironic) echoing of the realist storyline'; he points out that there is no agreement on the chapter sequence of *The Trial*, for example.³ Based on the evidence and analysis it offers, this chapter argues that such a characterization would make Kafka the most important avant-garde influence on O'Nolan after Joyce's *Work in Progress* / *Finnegans Wake*. This argument is first suggested by Anthony Burgess in a review of *The Third Policeman* where he writes that its plot and characters are reminiscent of 'Kafka, we think, crossed with James Stephens. And very nearly,

¹ See Latham and Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, p. 50.

² Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 41. Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) is a key figure in German modernism and author of the montage novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929, English translation 1931), an important context for *At Swim-Two-Birds* as discussed in chapter three; Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), Expressionist poet and remorseful Nazi sympathizer.

³ Eysteinsson, p. 151.

but not quite, something of Joyce', concluding that even with *Finnegans Wake* behind him, Joyce 'might have been envious' of *The Third Policeman*.⁴ Picking up on Burgess's suggestion, the chapter demonstrates that several characteristics of O'Nolan's second novel, *The Third Policeman*, can be seen as a response to the novels of Kafka translated into English in the 1930s. Seeking alternatives to Joycean techniques, O'Nolan adopts Kafkaesque devices and deploys them in an Irish context. The result is 'Kafka [...] crossed with James Stephens', and almost Joyce, as Burgess writes.

After providing a short critical background to *The Third Policeman* in support of its argument, including our expanding sense of the novel's relationship to Irish history and cultural production, the chapter demonstrates the relevance of Kafka to *The Third Policeman* by examining *Irish Times* reviews of Kafka and Sheridan's own commentaries on Kafka for *Ireland To-day*. The chapter finds that the changes to novelistic representations of the subject which Sheridan discusses in relation to Joyce and Kafka provide an important literary context for *The Third Policeman* to engage with themes and techniques in Kafka's writing. The chapter then strengthens this connection by presenting a number of specific points of engagement between *The Third Policeman* and Kafka's novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, such as the use of sleep-cycles which renormalize the strange events of the narrative; topological distortions that undermine our perceptual apparatus; and the infinite regress motif, as is also explored by Escher, Dunne and Gödel at this time. The conclusion proposes that O'Nolan's novel synthesizes themes and techniques witnessed in Kafka's work with subject matter and styles more familiar to a mid-twentieth century Irish audience, generating an allegorical return to the traumatic memories of its recent history.

4.2. Contexts

In the second half of 1939 O'Nolan completed *The Third Policeman*, within months of the publication of his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*.⁵ That debut met with a mixed response: acclaim from fellow writers like Samuel Beckett, James Joyce and Graham Greene but hostility from some critics.⁶ Letters to his London publisher, Longman, suggest that O'Nolan felt it necessary both to produce a new book quickly in order

⁴ Anthony Burgess, 'Surprise from the grave', review of *The Third Policeman*, *Observer*, 3 September 1967, p. 22.

⁵ Cronin, pp. 97–99.

⁶ Cronin, pp. 86–94; Hopper, pp. 40–41.

to retain his small audience, but tone down the level of literary experimentation in his work to widen his appeal.⁷ On 1 May 1939 he therefore describes the new novel to his publishers as a ‘very orthodox murder mystery in a rural district,’ in which:

The perplexed parties have recourse to the local barrack which, however, contains some very extraordinary policemen who do not confine their investigations or activities to this world or to any other known planes or dimensions. Their most casual remarks create a thousand other mysteries but there will be no question of the difficulty or ‘fireworks’ of the last book. The whole point of my plan will be the perfectly logical and matter-of-fact treatment of the most brain-staggering imponderables of the policemen. (*L*, p. 47)

In some ways, *The Third Policeman* conforms to this plan. At the novel’s beginning, in conspiracy with his companion Divney, its one-legged and nameless narrator murders ‘old Phillip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade’ in order to get the money Mathers keeps in a black box (*CN*, p. 223). When he returns to the scene of the crime to retrieve the box years later he is killed by what we learn is an explosion, in a trap set by Divney, and enters a place, described variously as a country, county or parish where, continuing his search, he meets the ‘extraordinary policemen’.

However, O’Nolan’s plan as set out here makes no mention of de Selby: the mad genius who is the subject of the narrator’s obsession, his motivation for stealing the box and therefore the final reason for his damnation. The narrator tells of how, as a boy of sixteen, he stole a first edition of de Selby’s work, the *Golden Hours* ‘with the last two pages missing’; it was, he says, in lines that ambiguously seem to refer to both this theft and the later murder, ‘for de Selby I committed my first serious sin’ and ‘my greatest sin’ (*CN*, p. 225). Shortly afterwards the narrator has his leg ‘broken for me’ and obtains ‘one leg made of wood’ (*CN*, p. 225). In a parallel with the one-legged narrator of Beckett’s novel *Molloy* (1951, English translation 1955), this leaves him both disabled and partially prosthetic. The novel’s sprawling footnotes about de Selby’s theories and the exploits of his warring critics constitute a secondary narrative

⁷ See Taaffe, pp. 51–56 for a discussion of O’Nolan’s self-censorship in relation to Cronin’s claim that ‘all his life’, O’Nolan ‘was to cherish a naïve belief that his works would prove immediately successful, would sell in large quantities and would even perhaps make him a great deal of money’ (Cronin, p. 95).

within the novel which sometimes either effaces the main text or enters it directly (acting as a preface to several of the chapters). In addition, whilst O’Nolan is certainly correct when he says that the ‘most casual remarks’ of Sergeants Pluck and MacCruiskeen generate ‘a thousand other mysteries’, his promise that the novel will also moderate the ‘fireworks’ of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, with a ‘perfectly logical and matter-of-fact treatment’, does not hold. The only convention of literary realism *The Third Policeman* follows is a mode of representation in which the story is told from the perspective of a single first-person narrator who attempts to process and rationalize his experiences. However, his narrative bursts at the seams with a sense of what Todorov would define as the fantastic: ‘that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’.⁸

The world of *The Third Policeman* is a place where the marvels of the ‘Atomic Theory’ mean that men and women are slowly changed into bicycles and vice versa, where it is possible to sharpen a spear to a point that is ‘so thin that maybe it does not exist at all’ or construct a set of chests that shrink in size until they are ‘nearly as small as nothing’, and where ‘Eternity’ itself is accessible via an elevator (CN, pp. 296, 280, 286, 337). The objects and places encountered by the narrator on his journey and the strange language in which these happenings are rendered result in a text which is both dazzling and unsettling. *The Third Policeman* also rejects naturalistic diegetic conventions by replacing the typical chronological plot structure of challenge, crisis and resolution (or beginning / middle / end) with a circular plot or ‘(bi)cycle’.⁹ That is, at the end of the novel it is revealed that the narrator is doomed to repeat the same set of events eternally. As the novel closes we watch him walking back towards the policemen’s barracks, this time with his companion Divney in tow but with no recollection of the preceding events.

The Third Policeman’s contemporary reputation rests on a history of exemplary theoretical readings, most clearly exemplified by Keith Hopper’s *A portrait of the artist as a young post-modernist* (1995, revised 2009) and Maebh Long’s *Assembling Flann O’Brien* (2014) but dating back to earlier evaluations by J. C. C. Mays (1971), Anne Clissmann (1975) and Hugh Kenner (1983) which firmly establish O’Nolan’s place in the canon

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*, trans. by Robert Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 25.

⁹ Long, p. 62.

of twentieth-century Irish modernism alongside Joyce and Beckett.¹⁰ Hopper's book, as well as applying structuralist and post-structuralist readings to the novel, identifies a number of sources and influences that help to explain the strange events and structure of *The Third Policeman*. O'Nolan belongs, for example, to a chain of writers who make a similarly subversive use of footnotes: from Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (1704), Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) published before *The Third Policeman* was written, to Beckett's *Watt* (written during World War Two, published in 1953) and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) after it.¹¹ Hopper discusses the now well-established influence of Joris-Karl Huysmans and J. W. Dunne on the theories of de Selby, and also suggests the importance of contemporary sources such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Crock of Gold* (1912) by James Stephens as an influence on the policemen, alongside influences for the plot that include Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and the ninth century *Voyage of Muldoon*. In a fascinating connection with Synge, Hopper even positions the narrator as 'in part a reconstructed Christy Mahon'.¹² Hopper, Wim Tigges and Taaffe have all also argued for the importance of the Victorian nonsense tradition in *The Third Policeman*.¹³ According to Taaffe, the novel's recourse to the works of Lear and Carroll, which exploit 'a marginal position in relation to canonical literature' and 'neatly fuse popular culture and high literature', involves the use of 'classic nonsense devices': 'narrative arbitrariness, fondness for lists, repetition and circularity, and [...] rearrangements of time and space'.¹⁴ For Taaffe, the novel's circular plot and its apparent resistance to any definitive interpretation is a function of this 'comic mode' of nonsense, which 'is obsessed with logic, though it never quite

¹⁰ J. C. C. Mays, 'Brian O'Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination' in *Myles*, pp. 77-119; Hugh Kenner, 'The Mockers' in *A Colder Eye: the Modern Irish Writers* (Allen Lane, 1983), pp. 253-61.

¹¹ Hopper, p. 153. Joseph Brooker explores the parallels with *Pale Fire* in "'That Carrousel Inside and Outside My Head": Flann O'Brien and *Pale Fire*' in Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (eds), *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays, The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 31.3 (Fall 2011) (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), pp. 120-133.

¹² Hopper, p. 163, 119-20, 107, 110, 120, 201

¹³ Hopper, pp. 215-219; Wim Tigges, 'Ireland in Wonderland: Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* as a Nonsense Novel' in C. C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen (eds), *The Clash of Ireland: Literary Contrasts and Connection* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), pp. 195-208; Taaffe, pp. 63-90.

¹⁴ Taaffe, p. 69.

deigns to make sense. Thriving on paradox, its subversion of authority is matched only by its whimsical authoritarianism'.¹⁵

The most recent turn in criticism of *The Third Policeman* has been towards historical readings which situate the novel alongside specific Irish events and near-contemporary Irish texts. In particular, the violence which Hopper and Long read in philosophical and linguistic terms – as violence enacted by textuality upon the Enlightenment subject – has been shown to also be a response to the literal violence of this period. Anna Teekell analyzes Beckett's *Watt* and *The Third Policeman* as novels in which 'there are clear traces of the war' even if, under Emergency conditions, 'the war is also muted, buried, hidden from view'.¹⁶ Teekell argues, for example, that *The Third Policeman* is entangled with the nascence of nuclear physics and atomic weaponry, citing work on this connection by R. W. Maslen.¹⁷ Tom Walker contributes another important historicizing account, suggesting that *The Third Policeman* is directly inspired by the 'death in 1929 of Detective Timothy O'Sullivan' after he and two other policeman attempted to open a booby-trapped box which corresponds to the cash box in the novel, and that more generally *The Third Policeman* is concerned with the trauma of the civil war which had officially concluded in May 1923 but lingered on in the form of sporadic rural violence, breaking out again with the major IRA campaigns of 1939, to which the novel 'might be seen as a dystopian response'.¹⁸ Walker points out that the sixteen year interval between the novel's first explosion and the date when the narrator returns to haunt his accomplice and murderer, Divney, echoes the sixteen year gap between the end of the civil war and time of the novel's completion in early 1940.¹⁹ He also refers to Anne Dolan's

¹⁵ Taaffe, p. 69.

¹⁶ Anna Teekell, 'Unreadable Books, Unspeakable Worlds: Beckett and O'Brien in Purgatory' in *Emergency Writing: Irish Literature, Neutrality, and the Second World War* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), pp. 159–204 (p. 174).

¹⁷ Teekell, p. 179, citing R. W. Maslen, 'Flann O'Brien's Bombshells: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*', *New Hibernia Review*, 10.4 (Winter 2006), 84–104 (pp. 101, 182).

¹⁸ Walker, pp. 126–128, 134.

¹⁹ Walker, p. 134.

historical work on trauma, memory and the long afterlife of civil war violence in twentieth-century Irish cultural experience as a relevant context.²⁰

Walker's essay is an example of how *The Third Policeman* can be intimately connected to specifically Irish forms of cultural production. He argues that its focus on the repercussions of a single violent event and its curiously hyperbolic descriptions of nature are to some extent an exaggerated imitation of passages in work by the principal Republican realists: Seán Ó Faoláin, Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty.²¹ In a similar way, Maslen shows that *The Third Policeman* is closely related to James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold*.²² O'Nolan asks Stephens for permission to translate his novel into Irish (L, p. 20), and a comparison quickly reveals that the strange English of *The Third Policeman*, which Kenner suggested 'derives from Irish-language mannerisms', is a strategy that owes something to the way the Irish language is blankly transliterated into a new dialect of English in *The Crock of Gold*.²³ Teekell also connects *The Third Policeman* to Yeats's play, *Purgatory* (1938), and Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1948), with which it shares 'both metafictional and gothic tropes and intentionally difficult language'; she argues that, like Beckett's *Watt*, the novel can be read as a black comedy 'on the death of the foundational Anglo-Irish genre better associated with Bowen, the big house novel'.²⁴

What is clear from all this work is that the more intertexts critics unearth, the more the mysterious allure of *The Third Policeman* - with its strategies that seem so opaque on first reading - emerges as the result of an extraordinary stylistic and thematic synthesis of many texts written in 1920s and 1930s Ireland, in addition to older English and Irish traditions of Menippean satire, metafiction and nonsense-writing. This chapter builds on those studies by suggesting that *The Third Policeman*'s structural characteristics owe a specific debt to another influence: the novels of Franz Kafka, which become available in translation in the 1930s.

²⁰ Walker, p. 129, citing Anne Dolan, 'The Shadow of a Great Fear': Terror and Revolutionary Ireland', in David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland: 1916-1923* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), pp. 26-38 (pp. 27-28).

²¹ Walker, p. 135.

²² R. W. Maslen, 'Fantastic economies: Flann O'Brien and James Stephens' in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 136-51.

²³ Kenner, 'The Fourth Policeman' in Clune and Hurson (eds), *Conjuring Complexities*, pp. 61-72 (p. 66).

²⁴ Teekell, p. 169.

4.3. Collaboration

Alongside the ongoing expansion in the scope of critical readings of *The Third Policeman*, archival research has also complicated and expanded our understanding of the novel's genesis. New research suggests that this most individual and unique of novels is, in fact, one manifestation of a shared *topos* and locus of attention for O'Nolan's immediate circle of collaborators. In that respect, the novel is a product of collaboration no different to the work discussed in the rest of this thesis. Much of this evidence was unearthed by Maebh Long and presented in her 2017 keynote paper, "'This is *not* about a bicycle": Brian O'Nolan and the Politics of Friendship'. Long shows how Sheridan, whose role in the production of *At Swim* is well-known but who hitherto seemed to have little to do with *The Third Policeman*, publishes a short story in *Esquire* in October 1939 entitled 'Matter of Life and Death' which is a close relative to O'Nolan's novel.²⁵ Long's paper notes that Montgomery also seems to have been cognizant of the policemen stories that O'Nolan and Sheridan are working on. In 1939 Sheridan writes to Montgomery referring to his own 'Civic Guard' story and musing on the possibility of making it into a radio play with the help of Denis Johnston.²⁶ As Long notes in the *Collected Letters*, Sheridan's story is adapted into a typescript for a play entitled *Seven For A Secret* which is performed at the Abbey, produced by Ria Mooney, as *Seven Men and a Dog*, in 1958 (L, p. 93). O'Nolan writes warmly about the script in a letter to William Saroyan on 7 September 1940:

The other Niall (Sheridan) has written what I think is a very excellent play, also about policemen. The main characters are three policemen and a greyhound and that's not a bad start. You could spend a lot of money on scenery and not get anything looking so impressive on stage. He has only

²⁵ Maebh Long, "'This is not about a bicycle": Brian O'Nolan and Politics of Friendship', unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Acting Out: Fourth International Flann O'Brien Conference' (University of Salzburg, 17–21 July 2017), citing Niall Sheridan, 'Matter of Life and Death', *Esquire* (October 1939), <<http://archive.esquire.com/article/1939/10/1/matter-of-life-and-death>> [accessed 15 June 2019], 97, 110, 112.

²⁶ Undated letter from Sheridan to Montgomery, NLI, Niall Montgomery Collection, MS 50,118/26/28, 26. A letter written on the same letterhead is dated 'Wednesday 18th Jan', placing it in 1939.

submitted it just now to the theatres here but he has sent a copy off to Gross, a New York agent whom you probably know. I hope he does well with it. It's the sort of thing that could make a lot of money. It's straight, however, not in the Saroyan canon. I've not yet tried to follow your advice about making *my* policemen go on the stage. It's a grand idea but would be very difficult to work out. (*L*, pp. 92–93)

In 1940 Montgomery also exchanges letters with William Saroyan, who mentions his plans to try and get the manuscript of *The Third Policeman* published in the United States.²⁷ O'Nolan's own letter to Saroyan suggests a kinship between the two 'policemen' stories, as if Sheridan's effort reflects well on his own, with the phrases 'also about policemen' and '*my* policemen'. The *Esquire* version of the story bears out such a comparison. In this story the unnamed protagonist (referred to only as 'the stranger') is an Englishman who murders his companion, Lafontaine, and meets three policemen when he goes to turn himself in: Guards Donohue and Flanagan and an unnamed Sergeant. The Sergeant bears a strong likeness to Sergeant Pluck, such as when the stranger stares 'blankly at the broad expanse of the Sergeant's back' and observes 'the ruddy folds of flesh above his tunic collar'. Like Pluck, this Sergeant insists that the matter must be about a bicycle: 'Someone is after stealing your bicycle I suppose, when was it pinched?'. Sheridan's story closely mirrors *The Third Policeman* when the stranger responds by losing his cool:

'Now was it an old machine or a new one? Twenty-six or twenty-eight inch wheels? Was there a three-speed gear on it?'

The stranger began to bang both fists on the table, scattering the Sergeant's pile of coins.

'Will you listen,' he fairly shouted. 'This is not about a bicycle. It's a much more serious matter than any bicycle could be.'

The Sergeant looked at Flanagan and then at Donohue.

'I see,' he said gravely. 'It's about a motor-bicycle.'²⁸

²⁷ Letter from William Saroyan to Niall Montgomery, 9 June 1940, NLI, Niall Montgomery Collection, MS 50,118/26/28, 26.

²⁸ Sheridan, 'Matter of Life and Death', p. 97.

The exchange and its comic tenor is unmistakably similar to this passage in *The Third Policeman*:

‘Is it about a bicycle, he asked?’

[...]

‘No’, I answered, stretching forth my hand to lean with it against the counter.

The Sergeant looked at me incredulously.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked.

‘Certain.’

‘Not about a motor-bicycle?’ (CN, p. 267)

The stranger confesses to attacking his friend in the same way that the narrator in *The Third Policeman* kills Mathers (‘I crashed my stick down on his skull’), before Lafontaine falls off a ledge into a lake and disappears. However, he’s fortunate that the policemen in Sheridan’s story share Pluck and MacCruiskeen’s opaque and arbitrary notion of justice. The Sergeant, suspicious that Lafontaine may be ‘[of] French extraction’, convinces himself that the attack was in self-defence and the fall an accident, and, ‘with a firm, ample grip’, escorts the stranger out of the police station.²⁹ There can be no doubt that this strange vignette is either an archetype or another version of the corresponding scene in chapter four of *The Third Policeman*. Long’s discovery and these letters demonstrate that *The Third Policeman* originated in collaboration between Sheridan, Montgomery and O’Nolan as a shared set of ideas. The extent of their collaboration on these ideas is a good indication that, when Sheridan publishes the articles about Kafka this chapter discusses, O’Nolan is familiar with the material and has probably discussed those ideas with Sheridan too.

4.4. Kafka in Ireland

On a general level, it’s now clear that the cultural developments in Central Europe in the 1910s and 1920s exert an influence on the cultural life of painters, writers and dramatists in Dublin by the 1930s and 1940s. As will be discussed in chapter five, one example of this influence is O’Nolan’s second play, *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play* (1943), which is an adaptation of *Pictures from the Insects’ Life* by Josef and Karel Čapek (1922). W. J. McCormack, in his preface to the 1994 publication of

²⁹ Sheridan, ‘Matter of Life and Death’, pp. 110, 112.

this O’Nolan play, also suggests a parallel with ‘the novels of Franz Kafka, in which a logic as inescapable and elusive as that of *The Third Policeman* had earlier been confronted in *The Trial* and *The Castle*’; McCormack argues for the likelihood of cultural traffic between Central and North-Western Europe by pointing out that ‘Kafka had been introduced to the English-speaking world by a translator (Edwin Muir) born in the Orkney Islands’.³⁰ Like the O’Nolan circle’s friendship with William Saroyan, this is another detail in a wider picture of an internationalized and interconnected modernism.³¹ Its central transmission mechanism is avant-garde periodicals like *transition* and the *transatlantic review*, which advertise cheap editions of modernist texts, publish English-language translations of work by lesser-known figures from the 1920s avant-garde, and promote the latest work by those who would rapidly come to be canonized as practitioners of international modernism.³²

McCormack’s argument that the ‘relations between the various epicentres of literary modernism cannot be measured in miles or kilometres’ is borne out by contemporary sources.³³ In London, Secker publishes Muir-translated editions of *The Castle* (1930), *The Great Wall of China* (1933), *The Trial* (1937) and *America* (1938) in the period running up to the writing of *The Third Policeman*, and an English translation of Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’ is published in the *transition* issues of 1937 and 1938. In 1942, the British literary magazine *Horizon* publishes Kafka’s ‘In The Penal Colony’, translated into English by Eugene Jolas.³⁴ Kafka’s writing receives attention in the Irish middlebrow press and in literary magazines. In 1933, an anonymous *Irish Times* reviewer, discussing Kafka’s *The Great Wall of China*, praises the ‘weird originality of Kafka’s genius and his curious mastery over all forms of writing’, reading ‘Investigations of a Dog’ as an allegory for existence and the fate of geniuses who finish their lives with ‘the work unfinished and their promise unfulfilled’.³⁵ On 7 August 1937 the *Irish Times* reviews *The Trial*. Imprecisely identifying Kafka as ‘a

³⁰ W. J. McCormack, ‘Series Editor’s Preface’ in Robert Tracy (ed.), *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1994), p. vi.

³¹ See Peter Kalliney, *Modernism in a Global Context*, New Modernisms Series (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

³² Ó Conaire mentions *transition* and the *transatlantic review* as magazines read by the O’Nolan circle (Ó Conaire, ‘*At Swim-Two-Birds*: Sweeny & Many Others’, p. 135).

³³ McCormack, p. vi.

³⁴ Franz Kafka, ‘In The Penal Colony’, trans. by Eugene Jolas, in *Horizon*, 5.27 (March 1942), 158–83.

³⁵ Anon., ‘Recent fiction’, *Irish Times*, 22 July 1933, p. 4.

Russian author, who wished his writings buried with him', the review reads the novel as an allegory 'too subtle for a direct interpretation' which presents 'in a novel way the spiritual crisis in the life of a young man of thirty, bewildered either by his own metaphysical doubts and fears or by the conflicting evidence of accumulating and contradictory judgments formed about him by his friends'.³⁶

If these sources serve to demonstrate that Kafka occupies a certain position at the margins of middlebrow Ireland in the 1930s, then two reviews written by Sheridan and published in *Ireland To-day* in 1937 prove that for the O'Nolan's circle his position is more central. In June 1937 Sheridan reviews *The Metamorphosis* and William Saroyan's *The Gay and Melancholy Flux* in *Ireland To-day*'s 'Book' section. Saroyan, who arrives on the international modernist literary scene in 1934 with *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, a collection of vignettes published by the New York-based experimental press, New Directions, that rejects narrative conventions and questions the ethics of fiction writing, is himself an under-examined influence on O'Nolan's work at this point.³⁷ Saroyan visits Dublin in June 1939 and writes about his time in Dublin 'going around town with the Irish poet Niall Montgomery or the Irish novelist Flann O'Brien' as part of his introduction to the play *Elmer and Lily* in a collection entitled *Raz̃le Daz̃le* (published first in the United States in 1941) where he also mentions meeting Donagh MacDonagh, Frank O'Connor, Liam Redmond and R. M. Smyllie.³⁸ In his review for *Ireland To-day*, Sheridan praises Saroyan evenly as a writer who 'must compel the interest of every student of the *genre*' and who, whilst he 'lacks balance and certainty' is 'prompted by an urge to enlarge the scope of the *genre* and to free it from the limitations imposed on it by the magazine market' (emphasis in original). Kafka, according to Sheridan in this review, is likewise a writer whose work breaks through limitations in ways that deserve our attention:

Franz Kafka is only slightly known as yet to readers of English. Of the work which he left at his early death, only two volumes have been translated – *The Castle* and *The Great Wall of China*. But these were sufficient to proclaim Kafka as a writer of genius. *The Castle* is one of the finest achievements in modern

³⁶ Anon., 'New Novels', *Irish Times*, 7 August 1937, p. 7.

³⁷ To redress this lack of attention, Joseph LaBine has a forthcoming essay on Saroyan and O'Nolan in Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (eds), *Acting Out* (Cork: Cork University Press, tbc).

³⁸ William Saroyan, *Raz̃le Daz̃le* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 204.

fiction; by it alone Kafka may be said to have added, as it were, another dimension to the novel. His unique blending of actuality and phantasy, his subtle and pervasive irony, and his perception of spiritual and emotional vistas neglected by the realists, make him one of the most significant writers in modern fiction.

The Metamorphosis is a long-complete story of 74 pages, and is sufficiently typical of Kafka's work to serve as an introduction for those who have not yet become acquainted with his other books. The theme – the metamorphosis of a man into a species of vermin – and its implications are handled with extraordinary skill, and the story is reminiscent of *The Giant Mole*, that absorbing study of persecution-mania which delighted all readers of *The Great Wall of China*.³⁹

The final remark implies that whilst 'only slightly known' Kafka is still familiar to a certain set of readers as a 'writer of genius'. This depiction of Kafka at the vanguard of modernism, whose 'unique blending of actuality and phantasy' and conquest of new 'spiritual and emotional vistas' make him a writer of vital importance, is reproduced in Sheridan's review of the English translation of *The Trial*, published in September 1937 and entitled 'Realism and Beyond'. Here, Sheridan outlines a conception of Kafka's work as a response to a post-war crisis within the novel form:

During the past thirty years, but more especially in the post-war period, the novel-form has been subject to stresses and strains which have led to distortion of the *genre* – even in the hands of its greatest exponents. *Ulysses*, a terrific achievement, was almost a disaster for the novel. It superseded the traditional form, and Joyce's preponderating influence on recent prose-writers has been another distorting factor. There has also been the temptation to impose upon the novel a filmic technique. And there has been the propagandist tendency, an outcome of the attempt to reflect modern social conditions in fiction.

In these circumstances, Kafka seems to me to be doing a great service to the novel. He is achieving something unique, and yet something which is germane to the novel-form itself. He is, as it were, discovering a new

³⁹ Niall Sheridan, 'Book' section, *Ireland To-day*, 2.6 (June 1937), 89–90 (p. 89).

dimension within the *genre*. Like Stuart, he is a romantic who can accept easily all those implications of existence which the realists made such capital of accepting. And this attitude gives his work strength and substance, enables him to create a world credible and congruous within itself.⁴⁰

Like the *Irish Times* reviewer, Sheridan sees *The Trial* as open in its potential meanings, ‘an allegory which each reader will interpret in his own way’, but he also sees in it a way forward for a novel form imperilled by twentieth-century ‘stresses and strains’. Sheridan argues that Kafka continues to execute the novel’s central task of psychological representation but only through – by introducing substantial formal innovations – opening up a ‘new dimension’ within that genre. In this sense, Sheridan’s characterization of Kafka bears a certain similarity to how O’Nolan describes his new novel to his publisher in the letter quoted above about the very ordinary policemen who nevertheless ‘do not confine their investigations or activities to this world or to any other known planes or dimensions’.⁴¹ Sheridan’s two uses of the term ‘modern fiction’ in the June 1937 review also provide us with a sense of the meaning of literary modernism for the O’Nolan circle. Although it is all subject to ‘Joyce’s preponderating influence’, there is an acknowledgement of a modernism outside of Joyce, including Kafka, that contains a range of solutions not only to the problem of writing in the wake of Joyce but more generally to the problem of responding to ‘modern social conditions’ and the ‘implications of existence’.⁴²

⁴⁰ Niall Sheridan, ‘Realism and Beyond’, *Ireland To-day*, 2.9 (September 1937), 85–86 (p. 86)

⁴¹ Cronin, p. 97.

⁴² However, it should also be noted that the Kafka encountered by this generation (and therefore their notion of the Kafkaesque) differed from our modern reading in a fundamental respect. Howard Caygill has pointed out that ‘Max Brod’s decision posthumously to publish his friend’s novels in a different order from their composition - *The Trial* in 1925, *The Castle* in 1926 and *Amerika* in 1927 - misled an entire generation of readers into assuming that they were written in this order and that they portrayed a development in Kafka’s literary and political imagination. This development, abetted by Brod’s comments on the supposed redemptive ending of *Amerika*, was understood in terms of a possible optimistic, utopian solution to the bureaucratic dystopias of *The Castle* and *The Trial* most apparent in the last chapter of *Amerika*, the ‘Nature Theatre of Oklahama’ (Howard Caygill, ‘The Fate of the Pariah: Arendt and Kafka’s “Nature Theatre of Oklahoma”’, *College Literature*, 38.1 (Winter 2011), 1–4 (pp. 1–2)). It seems likely that Sheridan also writes with this inverted chronology in mind, which may conceivably influence his characterization of Kafka’s novels.

Other textual sources from the 1940s provide yet more evidence that O’Nolan is writing consciously in response to Kafka. So far, the main source for Kafka’s relevance to his circle has been Sheridan’s essay, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ (1973) where he attests to ‘a lively interest’ amongst their friends ‘in Proust, Kafka and Kierkegaard. Brian greatly admired these last three writers’.⁴³ However, another example is a memoir of Charles Donnelly, the promising poet and Marxist member of the O’Nolan UCD circle who is killed in the Spanish Civil War, published by Donagh MacDonagh in the *Irish Times* on 15 March 1941. MacDonagh paints a picture of Donnelly’s reading which aligns with Sheridan’s account but adds more detail to it and is published closer in time to the period it describes:

His enthusiasms of that time were mine – Eliot and Yeats, Huxley, Proust and what I had read of Joyce. He had read far more than I had, knew the Elizabethans, Rimbaud and Baudelaire in translation – it angered him that he did not know French – Kafka and *Transition*. How old was he then? Maybe 19 or 20. He was beginning to read Whitehead and Spinoza, and when he spoke in his small and passionate voice I was reminded of Shelley and Godwin.⁴⁴

Of any set of readers in Ireland, the O’Nolan circle must have been among the most cognizant of the European avant-garde and writers like Kafka. It’s a familiarity which is borne out in Myles’s satires of avant-garde ‘corduroys’. When *Cruiskeen Lawn* mentions Kafka in this context on 10 October 1941, we can see that Kafka is required reading for a certain type of Dublin intellectual which he has in mind:

I had a little conversation with one [a corduroy] recently,

He: Have you read Kafka? (*pronounced Kafker*)

I: Of course. (*slight frown*).

He: D’you like his work? (*how intense are those velvet eyes!*)

I: Not frightfully, actually.

⁴³ Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ in *Myles*, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Donagh MacDonagh, ‘Charlie Donnelly’, *Irish Times*, 15 March 1941, p. 5.

He: I'm not terribly surprised, really. Kafka is too sweet and tenuous for you, I'm sure. He somehow lacks that tough metaphysical quality that is so typically Irish. (*CL*, 10 October 1941, p. 2)

In this excerpt, the figure of the Kafka-reading 'corduroy' is satirized in *Cruiskeen Lawn* through a dialogue that applies several layers of misreading (as is typical of the treatment of Joyce and of modernists in general in *Cruiskeen Lawn*). Kafka is 'too sweet and tenuous' (a characterization of his work perhaps based on the stories of his physical fragility and illnesses) and lacks the 'tough metaphysical quality that is so typically Irish', an almost oxymoronic description which marries what may be an allusion to the high point of Anglo-Irish metaphysical philosophy in the eighteenth century to the cliché of picking out almost any characteristic as 'typically' Irish. The negative statement is a rarefied and abstract performance of Irishness which paradoxically comes close to a description of how Kafka is read – his novels had after all been explained as 'metaphysical' in the *Irish Times* just a few years earlier.⁴⁵

4.5. Sleep and structure

Though not yet making a case for influence, M. Keith Booker establishes Kafka as a comparative context for O'Nolan in *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire* (1995). His remarks are discussed in full later in this chapter, and as he observes, *The Third Policeman* also has many specific parallels with *The Castle*.⁴⁶ Both texts feature a protagonist who finds himself in a familiar-yet-foreign jurisdiction, of an uncertain historical period, with an opaque task to accomplish that requires repeated and frustrating negotiations with representatives of a bureaucratic authority. Ultimate authority in *The Third Policeman* is also something more mysterious than simply the barracks, if we consider the imposition of Inspector O'Corky into the narrative in chapter seven (*CN*, pp. 305–7). Perhaps, as Sergeant Pluck likes to observe: 'the lock, stock and barrel of it all [...] is the County Council' (*CN*, p. 293, p. 301). The suggestion that the policemen do not enjoy total authority but must report to an inspector, who in turn reports to some other authority, links power in the world of the novel back to the opaque and sometimes arbitrary political structures of colonial Ireland centred on Dublin Castle, which Roy Foster describes as 'an accumulation of

⁴⁵ Anon., 'New Novels', *Irish Times*, 7 August 1937, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Booker, pp. 127–28.

offices and administrative mechanisms that had piled up since medieval times' and which as such 'included many anomalies and sinecures'.⁴⁷ Just as Kafka's daily work as a privileged administrator in the Austro-Hungarian insurance system offered him a vantage point from which to speculate on the functioning of language and power inside a complex bureaucratic system, the fuzzily delineated yet menacing operation of power and violence in *The Third Policeman* may owe something to O'Nolan's career in the Irish civil service, joining in July 1935 and obtaining the position of private secretary to the Minister of Local Government in 1937 (*L*, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv).

In both novels the protagonist seems to carry this sense of privilege with him, displaying a certain contempt for the provincial folk he encounters. Both narrators must also combine a cognitive effort to make rational sense of the world with the satisfaction of a physical urge for repose that often undermines this effort. *The Castle's* protagonist is often waylaid by a quest for sleep; above all else, it is tiredness, fatigue and a periodic collapse into unconsciousness which structures the alternation between rationalizing activity and exhausted passivity that stands in for K's interiority. Continuous fatigue becomes a distorting *camera obscura* through which K must attempt to navigate his world. This situation is most evident in one passage of the Muir translation that captures well the rolling flow of Kafka's German prose:

K. remained aware that his weariness had today done him more harm than all the unfavourableness of circumstances, but why could he, who had believed he could rely on his body and who would never have started out on his way without that conviction, why could he not endure a few bad nights and one sleepless night, why did he become so unmanageably tired precisely here where nobody was tired or, rather, where everyone was tired all the time, without this, however, doing any damage to his work, indeed, even seeming to promote it? The conclusion to be drawn from this was that this was in its way a quite different sort of fatigue from K.'s. Here it was doubtless fatigue amid happy work, something that outwardly looked like fatigue and was actually indestructible repose, indestructible peace. If one is a little tired at

⁴⁷ Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989; repr. 1990), p. 229.

noon, that is part of the happy natural course of the day. 'For the gentlemen here it is always noon,' K. said to himself.⁴⁸

Michael Wood writes of how K's sleepiness thwarts his intentions, such as when he wanders fortuitously into the wrong room and meets the genial official Bürgel, only to doze off just as Bürgel 'makes an unmistakable, if complicated offer of help', and subsequently awakes, 'dimly aware of what he has missed through sleeping'.⁴⁹

Structurally, the hypnagogic rhythms of fatigue and sleep in Kafka's novels allow for a renormalization of his uncanny worlds, eternally foiling K's attempts to reach the castle and, by imposing a dreamlike state, establish a unity of what Sheridan calls 'actuality' and 'phantasy'.⁵⁰ The state of insomnia is a physiological baseline that allows the worlds of *The Castle* to remain 'credible and congruous within itself'.⁵¹

Sleep is, of course, a key dimension to the contrivance and interpretation of *Finnegans Wake*, which Joyce defends to Harriet Shaw Weaver as a book about the 'great part of human existence' which 'cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wide-awake language, cutandry grammar and goahead plot'.⁵² To another, Joyce explained that 'I want to describe the night itself. *Ulysses* is related to this book as day is to night [...] it is as in a dream, the style gliding and unreal as the way it is in dreams'.⁵³ However, *The Third Policeman* uses sleep in a way which is more closely related to the mechanics of exhaustion in Kafka's novels than to the possibilities for a subterranean language it offers to the *Wake*. In the jurisdiction of the policeman, where in certain parts it is 'always five o'clock in the afternoon', the narrator's bouts of tiredness and sleep also frame and renormalize the otherwise episodic or collage-like structure of his experiences, in which days slip into each other and the passage of time is unclear: 'It was a soft corner of the world, free from inquisitions and disputations and very soothing and sleepening on the mind' (CN, p. 291). With the

⁴⁸ Franz Kafka, *Complete Works*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, Ernest Kaiser, Eithne Wilkins, James Stern, Elizabeth Duckworth and Joseph Kresh (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976), p. 429.

⁴⁹ Michael Wood, *Franz Kafka* (London: Northcote, 2003), p. 76.

⁵⁰ Sheridan, 'Book' section, June 1937, p. 90.

⁵¹ Sheridan, 'Book' section, June 1937, p. 89.

⁵² Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 24 November 1926, in Richard Ellmann (ed.), *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 318.

⁵³ Ole Vinding, 'James Joyce in Copenhagen', in William Potts (ed.), *Portraits of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1979), p. 149.

notable exception of Julian Murphet's reading of this 'character's open disposition toward the drift of the infinite: sleep as the disintegration of all coordinates of integrity and coherence',⁵⁴ a certain critical emphasis on the narrator's doomed rationalization in face of the strange events he encounters has tended to occlude the analysis of the periods of indistinct sleepiness that border its episodes, such as the impressionistic passage at the close of chapter eight, in which tiredness engulfs the narrator's consciousness. This passage is also an example of material that Walker has identified as an imitation of the prose in Séan Ó Faoláin's first volume of stories, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (1932):⁵⁵

As I walked with the Sergeant I did not notice where we were or what we passed by on the road, men, beasts, or houses. My brain was like an ivy near where swallows fly. Thoughts were darting around me like a sky that was loud and dark with birds but none came into me or near enough. Forever in my ear was the click of heavy shutting doors, the whine of boughs trailing their loose leaves in a swift springing and the clang of hobnails on metal plates.

When I reached the barrack I paid no attention to anything or anybody but went straight to bed and lay on it and fell into a full and simple sleep. Compared with this sleep, death is a restive thing, peace is a clamour and darkness a burst of light. (CN, p. 350)

Stylistically, weariness triggers a change in register that resembles an inserted text, a transition into prose that Walker compares to the following by Ó Faoláin:

the cold yellow sky [...] was turning to a most marvellous red as of blood, and the scarlet light blackened every leafless twig and already rain-black and rain-green tree-trunk that stood against it and every ditch and scooped

⁵⁴ Julian Murphet, 'Flann O'Brien and Modern Character' in *Flann O'Brien and Modernism*, pp. 149–61 (p. 156)

⁵⁵ Walker, p. 135.

riverbank, and lastly the road and very sky itself became swarthy, and there was light only in the waves curling the river and the potholes of the road.⁵⁶

In effect, the operation of tiredness enables *The Third Policeman* to submerge a montage construction within its first-person narrative. This procedure becomes evident when we examine how the footnotes relate to sleeping in the novel.

Teekell argues that these footnotes are ‘not, as might be presumed by their format, parallel, but are interlocking’ with the main text. That is, they do not interrupt the text in an arbitrary way but operate as part of its structure.⁵⁷ This claim is borne out when we examine the role of sleep in *The Third Policeman*. The longest de Selby footnotes do not occur at random but always when the narrator is in a hypnagogic state between sleep and wakefulness. Specifically: the first very long footnote is at the start of chapter eight during the first night the narrator spends in the barracks; the second is at the beginning of chapter nine when the narrator has awoken from sleep in the same bedroom; the third is at the beginning of chapter eleven when the narrator has once again awoken in the barracks after becoming immensely tired in the previous chapter as soon as he is saved from the scaffold by the attack of the one-legged men. It is almost as if when the narrator’s waking mind is rising out of a sleeping state, the text makes room for larger amounts of de Selby material to seep into the narrative. In an effect which is indebted to J. W. Dunne, who suggests dreams give access to an ‘associational network stretched, not merely this way and that way in Space, but also backwards and forward in Time’, the former life of the narrator as a de Selby scholar leaks back in wherever sleep has disrupted the continuity of his waking cognition.⁵⁸ As Teekell suggests: the consistency of these parts of the book reveals the existence of a structure underpinning both the narrator’s direct experience and the secondary de Selby material. The relationship between them is governed by the onset and termination of sleep, a process which stitches together the pieces of O’Nolan’s allegorical text.

⁵⁶ Walker, p. 139, citing Séan Ó Faoláin, ‘Midsummer Night Madness’ (1932) ‘Midsummer Night Madness’ (1932) in *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 17–75 (p. 24).

⁵⁷ Teekell, p. 192.

⁵⁸ J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (London: A & C Black, 1929), p. 54.

Reflecting the way that the need for sleep keeps Kafka's narrators trapped inside his worlds, exhaustion in *The Third Policeman* also provides for its dysfunctional sense of plot progression when the narrator is misgoverned by it. For example, in chapter eight tiredness draws him back to the policemen's barracks where a small bed awaits, even as a gallows for his execution are being erected outside (CN, p. 350). Like Kafka's narrators, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* sometimes appears to be on the verge of understanding how these fits of fatigue operate in the world to prevent him from ever truly learning its secrets: 'Several times I had gone to sleep when my brain could no longer bear the situations it was faced with', the narrator observes in chapter eleven (CN, p. 373). This perceptually-induced narcolepsy mirrors the use of sleep in *The Castle* to short-circuit opportunities for narrative progression, such as the incident with Bürgel mentioned by Wood.⁵⁹

4.6. Space

Often, sleep in *The Third Policeman* also brings with it sublime or terrifying images of existence as infinite recursion: '*Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding rim*' (CN, p. 328 – original emphasis). However, these figures are not limited to the novel's passages involving sleep or dreaming. The narrator is confronted everywhere by the impossible dimensions of recursive structures (such as the spear point that is 'so thin that maybe it does not exist at all', the set of chests that shrink in size until they are 'nearly as small as nothing' and the 'map of the parish, complete, reliable and astonishing' which has emerged of its own accord on the ceiling of MacCruiskeen's room – CN, pp. 280, 286, 331). The infinite regression of many objects in *The Third Policeman* is one manifestation of its curious treatment of the topological in general. 'Topology' is a term which Steven Connor defines as 'spatial relations, such as continuity, neighbourhood, insideness and outsideness, disjunction and connection'.⁶⁰ Unusual or distorted 'spatial relations' are also often part of the challenges faced by Kafka's protagonists, such as when K is drawn by Frieda through a doorway 'of which he had never suspected the existence',⁶¹ or when, in *The Trial*, Josef K, as he searches for the Court offices where

⁵⁹ Wood, p. 76.

⁶⁰ Steven Connor, 'Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thought', *Anglistik*, 15 (2004), 105–117 (p. 105).

⁶¹ Kafka, p. 328.

he is to be interrogated, must confront a bizarre situation in which this powerful authority appears to be housed in a small garret in a sprawling, impoverished tenement block, where rooms never seem to correspond to their purposes: 'The Examining Magistrate surely could not be sitting waiting in a garret. The little wooden stairway did not reveal anything, no matter how long one regarded it'.⁶² Later, K visits the court painter who is supposed to be his salvation, Titorelli, and must grapple with the spatial relations of Titorelli's little studio, in which his own bed blocks up 'the little door in the wall' through which his subjects must climb to be painted.⁶³ Instead of these claustrophobic spaces and the sense of a confused inside-outside, *Amerika* is filled with descriptions of environments which approach a numerical sublime. The building that houses the business of the protagonist Karl's Uncle Jacob, with its dozens of immense halls, takes 'several days to traverse in its entirety',⁶⁴ and the city streets outside are an 'endless perspective of pavements filled with a moving mass of people, slowly shuffling forward, whose singing was more homogenous than any single human voice'.⁶⁵ Huge scale and minute detail are then blurred in the perspectives of *The Castle*, in which the object of K's striving is both dominating and indistinct, refusing to take on any definite shape:

It was neither an old stronghold nor a new mansion, but a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together and of one or two storeys; if K. had not known that it was a castle he might have taken it for a little town.⁶⁶

As Jacob Burnett observes here, ontological levels are confused in a tangled hierarchy: 'From K.'s vantage point the castle appears no different from a small town – no different perhaps from the small town in which he stands, looking up at the castle. The destination has become the point of embarkation'.⁶⁷

⁶² Kafka, p. 42.

⁶³ Kafka, p. 90.

⁶⁴ Kafka, p. 155.

⁶⁵ Kafka, p. 157.

⁶⁶ Kafka, pp. 280–81

⁶⁷ Jacob Burnett, 'Strange Loops and the Absent Center in *The Castle*', in Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross (eds), *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Camden House, 2011), pp. 105–119 (p. 111).

This 'Land Surveyor' is unable to make an accurate survey of his landscape: he is repeatedly frustrated in his attempt to reach the castle by a topology in which it often appears to be within an easily traversable distance during the day but can never actually be reached before nightfall. Later, he gazes at it shrouded in dusk and finds it similarly nebulous:

The Castle, whose contours were already beginning to dissolve, lay silent as ever; never yet had K. seen there the slightest sign of life – perhaps it was quite impossible to recognize anything at that distance, and yet the eye demanded it and could not endure that stillness [...] one did not know whether it was cause or effect – the gaze of the observer could not remain concentrated there, but slid away. This impression today was strengthened still further by the early dusk; the longer he looked, the less he could make out and the deeper everything was lost in the twilight.⁶⁸

Topological recursion, which can readily be evinced in critical readings of Kafka, is an explicit and repeated trope in *The Third Policeman*. In one example of the use of this technique, recursion and paradox is woven directly into the structure of *The Third Policeman's* narrative: each new phase of the book (and perhaps each level of the narrative world which the narrator enters) is accompanied by the sense of traversing a topological folding, a wobble of reality, in which space clashes with visual experience. Slightly before the narrator is killed in the explosion that occurs when he opens the black box in chapter two, he observes that when 'I reached the floor and jumped noisily down upon it, the open window seemed very far away and much too small to have admitted me' (CN, p. 237). Before he first sets sight on the policemen's barracks, another striking yet ineffable change occurs to the narrator which can be compared to the moment of his death earlier on: 'Something strange happened to me suddenly [...] There was nothing to see and no change of any kind had come upon the scene to explain what was taking place within me' (CN, p. 265). The barracks he approaches has 'at least one of the customary dimensions [...] missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder'. In a physical embodiment of the mistakes with perspective we see in a child's drawing, the narrator seems to 'see the front and back

⁶⁸ Kafka, p. 331.

of the “building” simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side’ (CN, p. 266).

The next such topological folding occurs when the narrator escapes from the barracks and returns to the house of Mathers. His journey into the house is marked by a juddering dislocation of perspective in which a window visible from outside seems ‘to be in the centre of the house’ (CN, p. 383). Bizarrely, the police station of Sergeant Fox is to be found ‘*inside the walls of it*’ (original emphasis):

The dimensions of the place in which I found myself were most unusual. The ceiling seemed extraordinarily high while the floor was so narrow that it would not have been possible for me to pass the policeman ahead if I had desired to do so [...] After passing through another tall door we began to mount an unbelievable square stairs. Each step seemed to be about a foot in depth, a foot in height and a foot wide. The policeman was walking up them fully sideways like a crab. (CN, p. 388)

When Fox, with the face and voice of Mathers, asks the narrator if he is sure he has escaped, he experiences another heave in reality, ‘as if the spinning of the world in the firmament had come against my stomach for the first time’ and he struggles to keep a hold of ‘the chain of the bitter day I had had’, experiencing a desire to see the ‘strong face’ of Divney again (CN, p. 389). As in the previous two examples, there is a topological folding: one dimension is subtracted from the narrator’s perception yet remains present in a sublation that produces unpleasant mental and physical side effects. The first two of these topological folds also correspond to changes in the nature of the goal that the narrator is pursuing. In the moments before the explosion, the black box is transmuted from a cash-box into a bomb. When the narrator approaches the barracks with his need to pursue the black box restored, it has changed from being a container for money into a container for omnium. Whereas the transitions in the rhythm of sleep and lengthy de Selby footnotes are demarcated by the narrator’s passivity and relative tranquillity, these topological folds are executed by means of a cognitive wrench. Sometimes the narrator is even impelled to stop thinking, ‘closing up my mind with a snap as if it were a box or a book’ (CN, p. 384). Like topological uncertainty in *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the distortion of space

into shapes beyond rational contemplation in *The Third Policeman* acts as a signifying system for its unresolved epistemological questions.

4.7. Conclusion

The Third Policeman's processing of twentieth-century history and its engagement with modernism helps to explain its formal devices and imagery. For example, recursion is perhaps such a dominant trope in *The Third Policeman* because it also refers to the widespread investigation of infinite regress across the arts and sciences in the early twentieth century. The period immediately preceding the production of *The Third Policeman* sees the publication of multiple works that explore the depths of systems in which an infinite regress occurs. They include Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem (1931), J. W. Dunne's *The Serial Universe* (1934) and the tessellated transfigurations of M. C. Escher's *Metamorphosis I* woodcut (1937). In 1928, Aldous Huxley publishes *Point Counter Point* in which his writer, Philip Quarles, imagines the transformations that would happen at the 'tenth remove' of a system in which a novelist places another novelist inside his novel, and so on: 'a novelist telling your story in algebraic symbols or in terms of variations in blood pressure, pulse, secretion of ductless glands, and reaction times'.⁶⁹ *Finnegans Wake*, which is arranged in the shape of a loop by virtue of an opening sentence that begins as the final passage of its last page, is another product of the investigative tendency that led literary, scientific, mathematical and artistic innovators in the early twentieth century towards the elaboration of figures for infinite regress.⁷⁰

Kafka's incomplete novels exhibit this 'strange loop' quality on a physical level, in that their putative endings are no more than artefacts of editorial practice, which had to impose closure on the mass of Kafka's drafts.⁷¹ *The Third Policeman* is also an explicitly not-quite-circular text, carefully repeating altered prose from a point near to the beginning, when the narrator first approaches the barracks, but with a difference. The second time the narrator approaches the barracks he is with Divney. At this point, the reader realizes that the novel intends to repeat itself but, as Brooker puts it, 'does not describe a perfect circle':

⁶⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965), p. 302.

⁷⁰ 'A way a lone a last a loved a [...] riverrun, past Eve and Adam's', Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, pp. 3, 628.

⁷¹ James Rolleston, 'Introduction: Kafka Begins' in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka* (New York: Camden House, 2003), pp. 1–20 (p. 1).

The clearest complication is the addition of Divney [...] In a continuing *The Third Policeman*, we might reasonably expect any number of newly dead characters to show up, doing unwitting atonement. That prospect might be dismaying, but by definition it would not be wholly repetitive.⁷²

The Third Policeman therefore resists the illusion of a perfect circle produced by *Finnegans Wake* when it links the book's ending and beginning with the same sentence. Instead of the impression of wholeness, the reader is left with a sense of problematic and strange incompleteness. This type of imperfect loop is akin to the fragmentary regression of structure and perspective in Kafka: it is frustrating, pointing tangibly to the unknowability of certain outcomes and the unreachability of certain goals. Richard Murphy suggests that structural ambiguity can be seen as 'a carefully delineated form of meaninglessness that is constructed, one which cries out to be interpreted' and the structure of *The Third Policeman*, always evasive of a definite interpretation, just like the experiences of the narrator himself, operates in a similar way.⁷³ Murphy regards the irresolvable structure of Kafka's novels, which Eysteinsson identifies with the collage technique, as the deployment of a nonorganic strategy which is immensely productive of meaning in the reader's mind because the

indeterminacies and 'semantic vacuums' occupying the center of Kafka's texts (for example, the meaning of the 'trial,' of the 'judgement' or of the peculiar 'metamorphosis') are at the same time polysemous symbolic constructions, created in such a way that they appear to articulate and organize a vast number and variety of unspecified anxieties in the minds of Kafka's readers and hence to invite a multitude of interpretations. It is precisely on account of the personal character of the response they call forth that they tend also to encourage a particular kind of interpretation and analysis which almost invariably wants to bring about a final and absolute resolution of the problems and thus a resolution of the anxieties these semantic constructions appear to formulate. Yet it is the text's simultaneous undercutting of any such harmonious illusion of interpretational closure and

⁷² Brooker, p. 52.

⁷³ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 26.

its resolute refusal to sanction any such hermeneutical consolations which clearly places Kafka's work in close proximity to the avant-garde, and to its characteristic projection of epistemological uncertainty.⁷⁴

This effect can aptly be compared to the proclivity of photomontage to generate different interpretations by combining imagery in a way that Bürger, following Benjamin, defines as allegorical.⁷⁵ In Hannah Höch's words, photomontage offers 'a new and immensely fantastic field for a creative human being: a new, magical territory for the discovery of which freedom is the first prerequisite'.⁷⁶

The Kafka comparison also helps us to understand how *The Third Policeman's* structure and motifs themselves constitute an engagement with political themes. M. Keith Booker notes the 'numerous parallels between the situation of Ireland under the British Empire (and its aftermath) and that of much of Central Europe under Austro-Hungarian rule' as well as using Deleuze and Guattari's argument that like Kafka, Irish writers 'like O'Brien and Joyce are also writing in the language of a foreign power' and are thus producing a 'minor literature' which subverts the language in which it written.⁷⁷ On this basis, Booker proposes that *The Third Policeman* is a sort of comic counterpoint to *The Castle* which offers 'significant possibilities for an intertextual dialogue that enriches the reading of both texts'.⁷⁸ He suggests that the two novels deal with the same fundamental themes (universal spiritual archetypes alongside satires of 'bumbling and inefficient bureaucracies'; fruitless wandering in search of an unclear goal; epistemological failure and the conflation of the mythic

⁷⁴ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ Bürger, p. 70.

⁷⁶ Hannah Höch, 'A Few Words on Photomontage' in *Hannah Höch*, pp. 141–42 (p. 142). Translated by Maud Levin.

⁷⁷ Booker, p. 126; Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, pp. 16–19. Pascale Casanova describes Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'minor literature' as a 'crude and anachronistic interpretation' of a 25 December 1911 diary entry in which Kafka ambiguously reflects on the need for 'everyone' from a 'small people' to know that 'part of the literature which has come down to him, to support it, to defend it – to defend it even he does not know it and support it'. Casanova contends that by suggesting that Kafka's sense of the politics in relation to the literature of a small nation relates to a revolutionary subversion of language rather than the national question, 'they impose a modern opinion upon a writer from the past who did not share it'. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2004) pp. 202–4.

⁷⁸ Booker, p. 128.

and the mundane) but reverse their respective emphases: *The Castle* helps to highlight the mystical elements of *The Third Policeman*, while *The Third Policeman* reinforces the political satire of *The Castle*.⁷⁹ For example, the portrayal of the God-like figure of Sergeant Fox, who yet has an ‘imagination so prosaic he can think of only the most mundane of miracles to perform’, can be compared to Klamm in *The Castle* or Beckett’s Knott, and perhaps critiques ‘an excessive interest in worldly affairs on the part of the Catholic Church’.⁸⁰ Booker also observes how ‘the obviously political intonation of *The Third Policeman* resonates with a clear element of political satire that resides in *The Castle*’.⁸¹ Another key thematic similarity which Booker highlights is a ‘quest for epistemological closure that remains unsolved’: the images and events in each novel beg to be interpreted, yet (perhaps, Booker suggests, as a function of imperialist domination and patriarchy) they present worlds where ‘the difficulty of communication is a central informing characteristic’.⁸²

In summary, we might say that through its intertextuality and its strange logic of authority and rebellion, *The Third Policeman* constructs an alternative historiography of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using devices and techniques inspired by Kafka, the trauma and fragmentation of Irish history is transmuted into an allegorical realm where history is restaged as recursive repetition. The vacuum of the narrator’s mind, which is repeatedly wiped clean, becomes a tool for remembering the intentionally forgotten. The world he negotiates can be seen as an archive of unspeakable events and his inability to comprehend that world is itself a potent metaphor for the impossibility of confronting trauma directly. It is appropriate in this sense that Wills praises the novel’s eerie suitability as a text of the Emergency, even though it was completed largely before the war began:

the novel’s surreal take on rural Ireland – a hell in which the protagonist, guilty of murder and theft is condemned to repeat forever his encounters with a series of inscrutable policeman – drives home the feeling of confinement. The afterlife of the central character (who is unnamed) has odd similarities with the ‘real’ world of Ireland in mid-century. The rural

⁷⁹ Booker, pp. 127–28.

⁸⁰ Booker, p. 130.

⁸¹ Booker, p. 130.

⁸² Booker, p. 131.

community, populated only by policemen and ageing bachelors, and cut off from commerce with the world outside, runs according to its own arcane laws. Bicycle crime, of course, is rife, but the community also boasts its own band of violent clansmen joined together in secret brotherhood – the ‘hoppy’ one-legged men a comic version of the outlawed IRA. As one of the policemen notes, it all adds up to ‘a beautiful commentary on home rule’, a portrait of a culture neither one thing nor the other, neither sovereign and independent nor imperial dominion.⁸³

Looking at the turn towards a more naturalist style in O’Nolan’s later novels, *The Hard Life* (1961) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), Booker concludes his comparison by suggesting that ‘[reading] O’Brien through Kafka, one might even suggest that O’Brien’s movement was not from modernism to naturalism as much as from the kind of modernism represented by Joyce to the kind represented by Kafka’.⁸⁴

Whereas ‘[writers] like Joyce might seek to defamiliarize language itself in an attempt to shatter habitual modes of perception and thereby gain new insights into reality’, Kafka, O’Nolan and Beckett all ‘seem to feel that no amount of intentional defamiliarization can reduce the essential foreignness of a world that, as Wallace Stevens put it, “is not our own”’.⁸⁵ Booker therefore suggests, like this chapter, that Kafka’s modernism offers an alternative to the direction taken by Joyce’s.

Applying Booker’s logic to *The Third Policeman*, the chapter contends that O’Nolan incorporates Kafkaesque elements into his own style of composition as a specific alternative to the linguistic bifurcation of the *Wake*, where an overflowing generation of meaning also carries with it the risk of incomprehensibility. The world of *The Third Policeman* accomplishes its own meditation on the trauma and violence that marks twentieth-century Irish experience through these alternative means, assembling countless historical and literary fragments into an allegorical structure which, like the *Wake*, renders this experience anew and is, as its rich critical history already shows,

⁸³ Wills, p. 264.

⁸⁴ Booker, p. 133.

⁸⁵ Booker, p. 133, citing Wallace Stevens, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ (1947). See *The Collected Poems: The Corrected Edition*, ed. by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 405.

endlessly open to new interpretations. In 'the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh forgetting of the unremembered', in this hell that 'goes round and round' (*CN*, p. 406), we nevertheless discover a kind of redemption.

Chapter 5 - The politics of *Faustus Kelly* and *The Insect Play*

5.1. Introduction

The Third Policeman would not be published until after O’Nolan’s death, but the success of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the first two years of the 1940s provides O’Nolan with a loyal audience and a public persona. He uses the platform offered by the *Irish Times* to make Myles na gCopaleen into one of metropolitan Ireland’s most well-known literary personalities: widely read and imitated from an early stage.¹ Aside from occasional references like that in Montgomery’s biographical note for *Furioso* in 1943, the name Flann O’Brien now lies dormant until its resurrection for *The Hard Life* in 1961.² In 1942, O’Nolan turns to the stage, one of Ireland’s most significant cultural forms in a period when, as Wills writes, ‘[the] theatres flourished, and more plays were presented annually in Dublin than ever before’.³ Terence Brown notes that, fueled by the growing international reputation of the Abbey, amateur dramatics surge in popularity during the Emergency; often encouraged by local clergy, it becomes ‘a major feature of social life’.⁴ There are also many more professional plays to see because ‘the exigencies of wartime had made Ireland attractive to Irish and English professional touring companies which in earlier days would have cast their sights elsewhere’.⁵ In 1941 both Michael Farrell and Seán Ó Faoláin publish articles in *The Bell* about thriving English and Irish-language theatre scenes in Dundalk and Galway:

¹ This popularity and imitability is shown by the facts that: as discussed in this chapter, his Abbey play, *Faustus Kelly*, is announced as a ‘Myles Na gCopaleen Play’ in the theatre sections of the *Evening Herald*, the *Irish Press* and the *Nationalist and Leinster Times*; and, on 26 January 1943, the *Irish Press* publishes a negative review of *Faustus Kelly* by Thomas Hogan, using the pseudonym T. W. and writing in a style that closely imitates that of ‘the Brother’ in *Cruiskeen Lawn* (p. 3).

² As mentioned in the introduction, Montgomery is described as ‘a member of a group of young, brilliant Irish writers which includes Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien) and Niall Sheridan’.

‘Contributors, *Furioso: A Magazine of Poetry*, 2.1 (1943), p. 56.

³ Wills, p. 305.

⁴ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002* (London: Fontana, 1981, repr. London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 166.

⁵ Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 167.

‘Dundalk abounds in separate and separately enthusiastic Dramatic Societies’, writes Farrell.⁶

This rise in the popularity of theatre provides the cultural context in which O’Nolan, as Myles na gCopaleen, writes scripts for three dramatic works which are performed between 1942 and 1943: the short sketch *Thirst*, which is performed as part of a Gate Theatre Christmas variety show for six weeks between December 1942 and February 1943; *Faustus Kelly*, performed from 31 January to 6 February 1943; and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play*, performed at the Gaiety Theatre between 22 and 28 March 1943.⁷ As such, circumstances contrive to ensure that a ‘Myles’ play or sketch is a hard thing to avoid for theatre-goers in Dublin during that winter season. In 1944 O’Nolan also writes a short play in Irish, *An Scian (The Knife)* and he continues to write plays and teleplays throughout his life.⁸ In 1965 O’Nolan oversees *When the Saints Go Cycling In*, an adaptation of his 1954 novel, *The Dalkey Archive*.⁹ However, the longstanding critical consensus on O’Nolan’s drama is that it fails to impress, both in terms of the reaction from contemporary audiences and its long-term literary value (the first claim feeding into the second). For example, labelling *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* as a ‘failure’, Daniel Jernigan describes the 1940s period of activity as a ‘brief and disappointment-filled foray into theatre’ (*PT*, p. xi). This chapter challenges both aspects of that consensus.

After summarizing several critical responses in section two, section three of this chapter returns to the contemporary reviews and concludes that the balance of

⁶ Michael Farrell, ‘More Country Theatre’ and S. O’F, ‘The Galway Gaelic Players’, *The Bell*, 1.4 (January 1941), 78–87 (p. 79).

⁷ On 30 January 1943 the *Irish Press* reports that *Jack-in-the-Box*, in which the short version of *Thirst* is performed as the finale, ‘begins its sixth week’ and that ‘no play has ever run for more than five weeks at the Gate Theatre before’ (p. 3). On 23 January 1943 the *Evening Herald* reports that *Faustus Kelly* will be performed for the first time on 25 January (p. 3) and on 6 February reports that is the ‘last night’ (p. 3). Abbey Theatre records confirm it is performed 11 times.

<https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/production_detail/1789> [accessed 4 September 2019]. The first review of the *The Insect Play* is in the *Irish Press* on 23 March 1943, p. 3 and the final advertisement of performance is in the *Irish Press*, 28 March 1943, p. 2.

⁸ ‘An Scian’, *BC*, 4/9, dated 4 December 1944 (translated as *The Knife* by Jack Fennell in *PT*, pp. 247–58). The two other stage plays in the archives are *The Handsome Carvers* and *A Moving Tale: A Dublin Hallucination*, and there are numerous teleplays dating from the 1960s.

⁹ Which, according to John Ryan, ‘seemed to be settling down to a long and profitable run’ in *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (New York: Taplinger, 1975), p. 142.

those judgements probably lies in favour of Myles rather than against him. The section demonstrates that the plays did not fail except in the eyes of certain critics and questions the logic of the dominant critical account which has emerged. In order to set the scene for its discussion of the major productions, section four consists of a discussion of the variety stage context in which *Thirst* is written and performed and the link between that Irish context and the European avant-garde. Sections five, six, seven and eight develop this revised understanding of the context for O’Nolan’s drama into a new discussion of *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green*. The chapter reclaims these plays as texts of literary value which reflect developments in European progressive theatre and use its techniques to deliver important cultural and political interventions. As such, the chapter places O’Nolan’s early plays amidst an international milieu of modernist drama that encompasses Bertolt Brecht, the Čapek brothers, Denis Johnston, Karl Kraus and Bernard Shaw. The chapter proposes that O’Nolan’s familiarity with Johnston and Shaw, along with his collaboration on the productions with the Edwards-Mac Liammóir partnership as part of the circle surrounding the Gate, brings him into contact with the ideas of progressive theatre.

5.2. Challenging the critical consensus

Existing critical accounts of O’Nolan’s plays tend to exhibit a similar line of argument. They begin, as Stefan Solomon does in 2014, by stating that whilst O’Nolan’s first two novels ‘eventually succeeded in gaining a receptive audience, his plays have never been held in the same esteem’.¹⁰ Or, as Thierry Robin puts it in the preface to his evaluation of the play *Thirst*, O’Nolan’s ‘tentative trials and forays into dramatic writing were far from commercially successful’.¹¹ The plays are deemed to have failed dramatically in the eyes of his peers. Robin, for example, says that *Faustus Kelly* is ‘received rather tepidly by critics and audiences alike’.¹² In 2015, Flore Colouma dismisses *The Insect Play* ‘as such a resounding failure that it was discontinued after only five performances’; comparing O’Nolan’s failure to Brendan Behan’s success with *The Quare Fellow* (1954) and *An Giall* (*The Hostage*, 1958) she

¹⁰ Stefan Solomon, “‘The Outward Accidents of Illusion’: O’Brien and the Theatrical’ in Murphet, McDonald and Morrell (eds), *Flann O’Brien and Modernism*, pp. 41–53 (p. 42)

¹¹ Thierry Robin, “Tall tales or “petites histoires”: history and the void in ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ and *Thirst*’ in Borg, Fagan and Huber (eds), *Contesting Legacies*, pp. 76–92 (p. 68).

¹² Robin, “Tall tales or “petites histoires”, p. 68.

notes that *Faustus Kelly* ‘played for a mere two weeks at the Abbey Theatre when it opened on March 1943, and received generally negative reviews’.¹³

Especially when it comes to *Faustus Kelly*, modern critics often find new aesthetic grounds to support what is taken to be a very negative contemporary judgement. For example, Alana Gillespie argues that ‘*Faustus Kelly* is not dramatically compelling enough to sustain two acts, let alone three and an epilogue’, although she concedes that it ‘also exhibits one of O’Nolan’s greatest strengths as a (dramatic) writer: effective characterization is achieved through accents and (character-specific) rhetoric’.¹⁴ The view that *Faustus Kelly* is dialogue-heavy and character-led, but light on plot, has its roots in Anthony Cronin’s suggestion that ‘the ancient art of storytelling is neglected in *Faustus Kelly* after the opening scenes’.¹⁵ In turn, Cronin bases his account on the diary of Joseph Holloway, the well-known Abbey ‘first-nighter’, who writes in his journal that, apart from the first act, *Faustus Kelly* is ‘all talk and no play’.¹⁶ Even though he concedes that *Faustus Kelly* did ‘fairly good business’, Cronin suggests that Holloway’s comments are representative of the broader critical view. ‘By and large’, he writes, ‘the critics agreed with Holloway’.¹⁷ Taaffe also builds an aesthetic judgement on top of this apparently lacklustre critical performance when she says that the Myles plays win only ‘mixed reviews’ and are ‘dismissed by some as toothless satires’.¹⁸ Such negative representations of the contemporary responses enable and often seem to require a critical emphasis on explaining the plays’ flaws rather than reading them as texts. Elsewhere, for example, Taaffe describes *Faustus Kelly* as ‘a frustrating, and maybe a frustrated, play’ and she argues that it is

Myles himself who is putting on the greatest act, struggling into the motley of the Abbey comedy [...] O’Nolan gave its audience what it was accustomed to expect, or rather, what he presumed it would expect. It was perhaps a pragmatic move, but not one to be expected of Flann O’Brien.¹⁹

¹³ Colouma, p. 59.

¹⁴ Alana Gillespie, review of Daniel Keith Jernigan (ed.), *Flann O’Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, *Parish Review* 2.2 (Spring 2014), 33–36 (p. 34).

¹⁵ Cronin, p. 135.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Cronin, p. 134.

¹⁷ Cronin, p. 134.

¹⁸ Carol Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys: the citizen and the artist’, p. 123

¹⁹ Taaffe, p. 178.

Taaffe casts a veneer of inauthenticity over *Faustus Kelly* by accusing Myles of ‘putting on’ an act for his presumed audience with derivative material. By implication, she excludes the play from the body of work which, in this reading, represents his more original and notable output (a related point is made about *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the late 1940s, by which time Taaffe argues that ‘Myles himself has been proven to be interchangeable – his manner easily imitated’).²⁰ Stefan Solomon is also largely critical and, in a complementary argument to Taaffe’s reading of the play as derivative, he compares Myles’s efforts unfavourably to wider trends in European theatre at the time. In the wake of ‘an “anti-theatrical” revolution’ which takes place during the modernist period, the plays fall victim to a common fate for all ‘character-based drama’.²¹ Citing Martin Puchner’s concept of the ‘anti-theatrical’ and his reading of Stéphane Mallarmé’s late nineteenth-century closet drama, *Igitur*, Solomon argues that O’Nolan’s

perception of the theatre was a far cry from the anti-theatricality of a number of modernist writers more accustomed to the demands of the stage play. As a playwright his model was Saroyan, not Mallarmé; accordingly, the emphasis for O’Brien seems to have been the possibilities offered by the stage for character, and not on its overshadowing in the work.²²

We observe in both Taaffe and Solomon instances of the prevalent critical account of the Myles plays. It is proposed that O’Nolan doesn’t match the modernist or experimental achievements of his novels on the stage, but instead retreats to a more conventional form of character-based drama. This form, having been superseded by

²⁰ Taaffe, p. 167.

²¹ Solomon, p. 42, citing the phrase from Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 1.

²² Solomon, pp. 42–44. Whilst Solomon is correct to identify Saroyan as an influence on O’Nolan, he is not attentive enough to Saroyan’s contemporary reputation at this point. *The Time of Your Life* (1939), which O’Nolan knew (*L*, p. 68) is something more than the ‘eccentric, character-based drama’ (p. 42); it is a highly experimental play which is full of meta-dramatic devices and a zany humour which bears comparison to O’Nolan’s own style. LaBine’s article on Saroyan and O’Nolan, “‘Comedy is Where You Die and They Don’t Bury You Because You Can Still Walk’: William Saroyan and Brian O’Nolan’s Playful Correspondence” will appear in the forthcoming Fagan and Fuchs (eds), *Acting Out*.

modernist anti-theatricality, fails on aesthetic grounds. O’Nolan is unable to produce plays that can compete with his novels for their modernist credentials.

Maebh Long critiques the Myles plays using different means in her essay on ‘Brian O’Nolan and the Irish stereotype’. Comparing the use of stereotypes in plays like *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* to that in the earlier sketches composed for *Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather*, Long notes that:

In many of O’Nolan’s actual stage and television plays [...] the extravagances of these earlier, blatantly satirical sketches are lost, and tired parody supports, rather than subverts, cliché. [...] it is [...] a matter of ensuring the audience is also able to shake off the traces of old, colonial representations and listen to regional accents without hearing the traces of stage brogue. While O’Nolan deliberately played on this confusion, he frequently fell afoul of it.²³

Rather than claim that he consciously produced derivative or conventional drama to play to presumed audience expectations or simply due to his own artistic limitations, Long suggests that O’Nolan allows a subversive representation of cliché to blur into mere repetitions of the clichés he is supposed to be satirizing. This, she contends, helps to explain the reception of the plays as ‘tired and hackneyed’ (she cites Joseph Holloway’s dislike for *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* as an example) and warns that instead of ‘finessing the line between “real” regional accents and “fake” stage brogue, these works are in danger of widening the stock type’s repertoire’.²⁴

Each of the critical accounts discussed here exhibit a tendency to mobilize the negative contemporary reception of the Myles plays to justify value judgements about their aesthetic weaknesses. This is a dubious procedure. As any discussion of the reception of modernist art reveals, the success of a given work with mainstream reviewers is not a reliable index for its long-term literary and cultural value. Critics do not seek to root out flaws or make value judgements when they evaluate *At Swim-Two-Birds* because it also received several negative critical reviews or because it sold

²³ Maebh Long, ““No more drunk, truculent, witty, celtic, dark, desperate, amorous paddies!”: Brian O’Nolan and the Irish stereotype’ in Borg, Fagan and McCourt (eds), *Problems with Authority*, pp. 34–53 (p. 43).

²⁴ Long, ‘Brian O’Nolan and the Irish stereotype’, pp. 43–44.

only two hundred copies.²⁵ To structure an account of O’Nolan’s first published novel in a similar way (that is, to follow the line of argument which presents it as a failure and then asks ‘why did it fail?’) would be illegitimately skewed.

Even if we accept the validity of such a line of argument, there remains a question mark over the factual accuracy of its opening claim: that the plays failed in the first place. This chapter shall now demonstrate how the prevalent account, in which O’Nolan’s brief career as a dramatist is brought to a swift end by a combination of short runs (indicating unpopularity with audiences) and negative reviews (indicating unpopularity with critics), is not correct. To the contrary, a fresh look at the facts surrounding the performances of *Thirst*, *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green*, along with the responses from both contemporary critics and others who saw the plays, significantly complicates this account. In establishing that the plays are received as works of value by audiences at the time of their performance – and proving that much of the hostility and controversy they generate is a result of political satire rather than aesthetic debility – this chapter clears a path for a deeper level of critical scrutiny into the plays’ sources and the nature of their cultural intervention. In particular, this investigation will challenge the idea that the plays are character-based, overly realist or simply ‘tired parody’, on the grounds that these critical judgments are based on just one of several available oppositions between the conventional stage of the nineteenth century and ‘modernist’ theatre. In section four, the chapter proposes that, rather than Mallarmé’s closet drama or Beckett’s plays, a better comparative reference point for the Myles plays is progressive theatre during the modernist period, as practiced by Brecht, the Čapek brothers, Kraus and, according to Brecht, also anticipated in the plays of Bernard Shaw. This revised historical lens exposes an association between formal practices and politics in the Myles plays which concerns sections five, six, seven and eight of the chapter.

5.3. The contemporary response to the major productions

As discussed above, an important component of the prevalent account of O’Nolan’s quick demise as a dramatist is an assertion that critics responded negatively to his major productions, *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green*. Following a convention established by Cronin, the opinion of Joseph Holloway is invoked by several critics as a representative response. But how representative, or even credible,

²⁵ See Cronin, pp. 86-94 and Hopper pp. 40–41.

are the opinions expressed in Holloway's private diary? The present writer proposes that, especially in relation to *Faustus Kelly*, Holloway's opinion should be handled more carefully. For example, on *Faustus Kelly* Cronin cites the fact that Holloway writes in his diary: 'The play itself proved all talk and no play; of course, much of it was witty and pointed, but after a promising first act – a meeting in the Council Chamber – it all became blather and highfalutin oratory'.²⁶ However, this remark is not apposite only to *Faustus Kelly*. Holloway's dramatic tastes are idiosyncratic in this respect and he frequently makes the complaint that plays are 'over-talky', as he does of *Faustus Kelly*. He is also far from what might be described as a respected or credible theatre critic, even if he is a useful historical source. The project to publish his journals encounters resistance from writers like Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Casey, who describe the journals as 'donkey's detritus' and 'an impossible pile of rubbish' respectively. Neither do Holloway's views age well: his moral and political outlook leads him to condemn what are now considered important plays by Synge, Lennox Robinson and Denis Johnston.²⁷ If we exclude Holloway's remarks from consideration, the range of contemporary responses which is left becomes more nuanced. The play is seldom condemned. In a review published by the *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, for example, the reviewer's criticism is carefully qualified and theatre-goers are still encouraged to see the play:

In ways – as a play – it was disappointing, although it has much wit, satire, topical and other allusions – and some vulgarity. It brings in the Faust theme with a chairman of a local council who is standing for the Dail, much rural character and atmosphere, and an 'unsanctioned' rate collector. It was splendidly acted and it is worth seeing.²⁸

The unambiguously hostile responses are mainly represented by Thomas Hogan's review in the *Irish Press* which, written in a style that imitates one of Myles's 'The

²⁶ Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (eds), *Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, 3 vols (Dixon: Proscenium Press, 1999), III, p. 83

²⁷ Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (eds), *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection of His Unpublished Journal: "Impressions of Dublin Playgoer"* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967, paperback 2009), pp. 77, xvi, xvii.

²⁸ Anon., 'Metropolitan Milestones', *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 30 January 1943, p. 6.

Brother' pieces, concludes that 'it was a terror of a play altogether, with lashings of bad words and long drawn-out speechifying, the like of which was never heard on land or sea'; echoing criticisms that the same paper will level against *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, Myles is attacked for writing plays which are 'dirty'.²⁹ Hogan, writing as 'T.W.', mentions that he met 'your man, Plowman, the poet' that evening, which probably refers to Patrick Kavanagh, who also decried the play at the time as 'vulgarity'.³⁰ Hogan is a consistent opponent of Myles and the *Irish Press*, with its strong links to Éamon de Valera, had good reasons to attack Myles, the in-house satirist of the *Irish Times*. As this chapter shows in relation to *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, we should perhaps take Myles a little more seriously when he claims his dramatic work has been opposed or undermined for political reasons. In 1954 he defends *Faustus Kelly* as 'an immense play!' and recalls that at the time,

I thought that I had gone too far, that the play (though straight farce) had hurt too many people, and that that sort of thing doesn't pay in this country. I also thought it exaggerated some notorious national failings. Re-reading it in this different age, I am convinced I was right, but that the work takes on a new importance by reason of life and facts catching up with it. It had an unsuspected oracular and prophetic content. (CL, 3 April 1954, p. 10)

The existence of political and cultural motivations to review the Myles plays negatively should make us wary of translating these critical attacks into the assumption that there are deep flaws waiting to be unearthed in each of them. Hogan makes obscenity the focus of his critique, and singling *Faustus Kelly* out for its vulgarity is not the same thing as attacking it for being derivative or flawed in its dramatic structure, as the later critics do (and which Hogan does not). It's not clear that Hogan's objections deterred audiences at the time. Instead, the attacks seem to have encouraged them, and provoking the conservative press is probably a deliberate strategy to sell tickets (just as it is used to popularize *Cruiskeen Lawn*). For example,

²⁹ T. W. [Thomas Hogan], 'Myles na gCopaleen Play at Abbey', *Irish Press*, 26 January 1943, p. 3. Thank-you to Val O'Donnell for revealing the author to the present writer at 'Acting Out: Fourth International Flann O'Brien Conference' (University of Salzburg, 17–21 July 2017).

³⁰ Cronin, p. 134.

on 6 February 1943 the *Nationalist and Leinster Times* reports that ‘in spite of the critics “Faustus Kelly” continues to amuse audiences at the Abbey’.³¹

Considering the part of the prevalent critical account which suggests that neither audiences nor critics favoured O’Nolan’s plays compared to others, it should also be noted that the majority of the drama at the Abbey in the 1940s consisted of re-runs of previously successful plays from the past three decades such as *The Whip Hand*, *Boyd’s Shop*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*, with any new work in Irish or English rarely exceeding just one performance. In this context, *Faustus Kelly*’s 11-performance run is more than respectable: it’s slightly more than the average of 8.4 performances for Abbey Theatre productions in 1943, or 10.3 when one-night plays in Irish are excluded.³² These figures suggest that whilst *Faustus Kelly* did not become an instant classic, neither did it perform badly compared to the average production.

In the case of O’Nolan’s second major play, *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play*, a focus on negative responses that misrepresents the actual reception of the play is more pronounced. As with *Faustus Kelly*, Cronin, who in this case may be relying largely on anecdote, given that the full script isn’t recovered from the Gate archive until it is published by Robert Tracy in 1994,³³ sets the tone for future critics:

All in all the *Evening Mail* was not far wrong when it said that he had used the ‘original framework ... to “put across” some rather banal topicalities more appropriate to the variety stage’ than to the serious theatre. The thrust of the satire, if satire it was, was obscure to most, nor did he succeed in making his insects representative of the human condition in the way the original he was working from does. Even the note of despair about human existence which is undoubtedly behind it lacks theatrical resonance. The play was not a success with audiences and so the theatrical ambitions that O’Nolan certainly cherished around this time were disappointed.³⁴

³¹ ‘Theatre’, *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 6 February 1943, p. 11.

³² See the performance archives at <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/search/year/1943/>

³³ Robert Tracy, ‘Introduction’ in Flann O’Brien, *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green*, ed. and intr. by Robert Tracy (Dublin: Lilliput, 2011, first pub. 1994), pp. 1–17 (p. 1).

³⁴ Cronin, p. 136.

Cronin's implicit denigration of the 'variety stage' is contestable: the role of the comedic variety show or cabaret as an interstice of popular culture and modernism in the early twentieth century is increasingly acknowledged.³⁵ As discussed in the next section, the example of *Thirst's* success as a part of *Jack-in-the-Box* demonstrates how, in wartime Ireland, the variety show is adapted to the needs of a more highbrow audience. In relation to Cronin's specific criticisms of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, two of those judgements can be corrected with the assistance of other contemporary reviews. Firstly, the charge that the play is concerned with 'banal topicalities' instead of themes more appropriate to 'serious theatre' and therefore fails as a work of satire. In fact, rather than the 'thrust of the satire' remaining obscure, the negative reviewers are conscious of the play's satirical intentions. Thomas Hogan in the *Irish Press* now accuses Myles of using the Čapeks' original 'cornerstone [...] to burlesque the divisions in this country to make a theatrical holiday [...] to mock the movement for reviving a national language and to sneer at the people of Ireland, North and South'.³⁶ Clearly for Hogan, Myles's satire stings. Hogan's attack provokes a reply from a writer identifying as L. Kieran, who argues that Myles is not 'sneering at our people, nor mocking the movement for reviving the National language'. Instead,

What he did show us was what does happen when the part has convinced itself that it is the whole and in egomaniacal obsession sets itself out to dominate and destroy all who differ from it. It is in this way that factions are begotten which destroys states and nations [sic]. The tendency to breed them is one which has cursed us all through our history and in bringing that truth so forcibly, if amusingly, before us – when the danger from them is perhaps greater than ever – the author was doing a national service.³⁷

In section eight, this chapter explores Kieran's suggestion by reading *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* as a sharply satirical play which uses its insect characters to represent

³⁵ As documented, for example, by Harold B Segel, in *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits: 1890-1938* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 4-5 or the fact that 'Joyce frequented Cabaret Voltaire and other Dadaist stomping grounds' noted in James Earle, 'Joyce and the Politics of the Tattoo', *James Joyce Broadsheet*, 64 (February 2003), p. 3.

³⁶ T.W. [Thomas Hogan], "The Insect Play" at the Gaiety' *Irish Press*, 23 March 1943, p. 3

³⁷ Letter by L. Kieran, *Irish Press*, 25 March 1943, p. 3.

the collision of different communities and interest groups on the stage, whilst preserving a vantage point of critical distance for its audience. In this respect, the play's method can be compared not only to its Czech source text but also to the satirical theatre of Karl Kraus and Brecht's programme for the epic theatre, as will be discussed in section five of this chapter.

In contrast to Cronin's suggestion that the 'play was not a success with audiences', this letter writer is not alone in his praise for the play. 'D.S.', writing for the *Irish Independent*, titles his review 'An Enjoyable Satire' and writes that, 'with the social satire cleverly adapted to our own problems I feel we saw the play as the brothers Capek would have liked their own nationalists to see it'.³⁸ For the *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* 'is interesting and amusing and as a theatre piece almost its only weakness is a rather unsatisfactory and abrupt ending' (as in the case of *Faustus Kelly*, note that the criticism is qualified by praise).³⁹ As Tracy documents in his introduction to the 1994 edition of the recovered text, the attacks on *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* are not principally motivated by charges of banality or dramatic failure (and it should be noted that, whether positive or negative, the reviewers universally praise the play's acting and production values) but on the basis of its obscenity.⁴⁰ Tracy records that the play was lambasted by Gabriel Fallon in the *Standard* for its use of 'expletives' and how this attack prompted a response from O'Nolan accusing Fallon of 'ignorance' and 'mental immaturity'.⁴¹

In the account presented by this chapter, O'Nolan emerges not as a novelist whose attempt at drama fails because it is insufficiently dramatic or derivative, but as a satirist who attacks dominant cultural narratives in ways that his reviewers find hard to bear. It isn't surprising that Myles offends conservative critics with the comparisons he draws between Irish and European politics and his send-up of certain kinds of political rhetoric. The offence he causes should not be taken to mean, as Long suggests, that the plays are received as 'tired and hackneyed'.⁴²

³⁸ D.S., 'An Enjoyable Satire', *Irish Independent*, 23 March 1943, p. 2.

³⁹ Anon., review of *The Insect Play*, *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 27 March 1943, p. 9

⁴⁰ For example, one critical review concedes that: 'Settings and costumes devised with consummate skill by Molly MacEwen and Michael MacLiammoir, combined with perfect production by Hilton Edwards, brought the mangled remains of the brilliant satire to life and gave us something well worth seeing'. 'Candid Criticisms: "Insect Play" at The Gaiety', *Evening Herald*, 23 March 1943, p. 2.

⁴¹ Letter by O'Nolan cited in Tracy, p. 13, and Notes to 'Introduction', p. 16.

⁴² Long, 'Brian O'Nolan and the Irish stereotype', p. 43.

5.4. *Thirst* and the variety stage

Modern criticism pays less attention to the performance history of the dramatic work which announces Brian O’Nolan’s ‘début’ as a ‘humorous dramatist’ (at least, according to the *Irish Times*).⁴³ This is the sketch *Thirst*, which features in a Christmas production by Hilton Edwards and Mac Liammóir entitled *Jack-in-the-Box*. Perhaps of all O’Nolan’s dramatic work, *Thirst* has won the most enduring praise from audiences and critics. ‘Whilst not as ambitious as *Faustus Kelly*’, notes Jernigan, ‘it is perhaps the most successful of Flann O’Brien’s plays’ (*PT*, p. x). Its long run of success as part of a variety show at the Gate Theatre during the Christmas revue season of 1942–43 is, on its own, enough evidence to challenge Solomon’s view that by ‘all accounts, O’Brien’s exploits in the theatre represented only marginal improvements on the sales of his first two novels’.⁴⁴ There may be ‘no colourful anecdotes surrounding its performance’ (*PT*, p. viii) to match the appearance of ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ as a ‘traditional stage Irishman’ on the first night of *Faustus Kelly*, but there is a good deal of reporting and discussion of *Thirst* and the *Jack-in-the-Box* variety show in which it appears.⁴⁵ For example, on 19 January 1943 the *Irish Times* reports: ‘More people have already seen the Gate Theatre’s “Jack-in-the-Box” than have seen any of their previous Christmas shows’.⁴⁶ In total, this ‘record run’ lasted for six weeks. The show receives a positive write-up in *The Bell* from ‘Cusex’, who in his round-up of the season’s pantomimes approvingly cites a note on the programme by Mac Liammóir’s which promises the audience ‘a far cry (very) from the fathomless imagery of Shakespeare to the mad mezzotints of Myles na gCopaleen’.⁴⁷

The consensus amongst critics that the Myles who succeeded as a columnist can be assumed to fail as a dramatist because *Faustus Kelly* only ran for eleven nights (which is actually quite a respectable tally for a new play, as discussed above) and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* lasted only five, is threatened by the runaway success which

⁴³ Anon., review of *Jack-in-the-Box*, *Irish Times*, 28 December 1942, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Solomon, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Cronin, p. 134.

⁴⁶ ‘Theatre’, *Irish Times*, Tuesday 19 January 1943, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Cusex, ‘Pantomines’, *The Bell*, 5.5 (February 1943), 404–9 (p. 409), citing Michael Mac Liammóir, ‘For Those Responsible’, *BC*, 1/49, “‘Thirst’”, part of “‘Jack-in-the-Box’”, Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942–43’, 1, 12 (p. 1).

greeted his first work for the Dublin stage.⁴⁸ It is actually *Thirst*, the most praised of O’Nolan’s plays by modern critics, which the largest number of Dublin theatre-goers encounter in the winter of 1942–43.⁴⁹ One plank of the prevalent critical account – that O’Nolan’s plays only ever had short runs – begins with this evidence to splinter.

Jack-in-the-Box is a Christmas show, a run of diverse variety pieces with a humorous focus but nevertheless informed by the Gate’s status as Dublin’s principal venue for avant-garde theatre. Along with Mac Liammóir’s note, the programme includes a statement by Edwards who writes that, as wartime denies playwrights the ‘repose and tranquility needed to gain the perspective to write good plays [...] experiment in the Theatre must take the form of experiment in the presentation of rather than writing of dramatic material’ and promises a blend of ‘the legitimate Theatre and Revue’ which is only in its infancy, for, ‘believe it or not, the Variety stage is the only legitimate Theatre left to us to-day’.⁵⁰ The programme also features a short article by Myles na gCopaleen entitled ‘Shows and Showers’ in which he responds to Edwards by comically condemning the ‘undue retreat from experiment’ in the Irish theatre and exploring his own proposal for artificially ‘staging a play in a downpour’ which ‘could be adjusted by operating a dial bearing every reading from *Drizzle* to *Cloud-burst*’. This scenographic revolution resonates with Edward Gordon Craig’s seriously meant but equally unconventional proposal to remove the mediating role of the actor’s body in a play by replacing actors with the ‘Übermarionette’, a hypothetical mechanical construct that enables the theatre itself to perform.⁵¹ Myles reminds us, however, that the experimental technique of staging rain is also a

⁴⁸ Five days as per *PT*, p. xi, following Cronin. However, the newspaper records suggest it ran each night from 22 March to 28 March: seven days.

⁴⁹ *Thirst*, because it is a short sketch, does not exhibit the episodic structure which seems to trouble critics in the case of his other plays. Perhaps due to its shortness, identify in *Thirst* the multi-layered structural density and thematic sophistication for which O’Nolan is commonly praised. Robin’s essay compares *Thirst* with the short story, ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ for its use of ‘hyperbolic reminiscence and performance; alcohol-fuelled confabulation marked by indeterminacy; and grotesque historical anecdotes in a pub setting. Once again, we find O’Nolan employing proto-postmodern strategies of *decanonisation*, *carnivalization* and *constructionism*, as distinctively local and burlesque “Irishness” is set against “Grand” historical events, narratives, themes’ (p. 87 – emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ Hilton Edwards, “‘Jack-in-the-Box’ and the Future” in “‘Thirst’”, part of “‘Jack-in-the-Box’”, Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43’, 1.

⁵¹ As discussed by Jacques Rancière in *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), p. 175.

nationalist gesture for the theatre, for '[rain], sodden steaming clothes, colds and universal damp, these are among the most truly national things we have'.⁵²

The programme shows that before *Thirst* there are performances of 'The Little Match Girl' adapted from Hans Christian Andersen, a piece called 'Zoo Blues' by Mac Liammóir (featuring a 'Tiger and Tigress from Bertram Mills Circus, London') and the performance of an Irish street ballad entitled a 'A Lady Fair', as recorded in Colm Ó Lochlain's *Irish Street Ballads*. Subsequent to *Thirst*, there is a performance of a meta-theatrical sketch entitled 'Four Flops (or Please Mr. Edwards, Will You Teach Me How to Act?)' (listed with the note '*The scene takes place on the stage of the Gate Theatre*'), followed by what might be the only ever performance of Oscar Wilde's unfinished play, *La Sainte Courtisane Or The Woman Covered with Jewels*, and a performance of the 'Finnegan's Wake' ballad as also recorded in Ó Lochlain's *Irish Street Ballads*, and choreographed by Sarah Payne.⁵³ After the interval the acts include a performance of A. A. Milne's *The Old Sailor*, a two-scene original work by Mac Liammóir entitled *The Stylish Marriage*, musical performances, the performance of a scene from Shakespeare's *Henry VII*, and a final sketch, entitled '*Vache Sur Le Toit*' or *Liffey-side Nights: A Political Misconception*.⁵⁴

It is significant that Myles's dramatic debut is as the centrepiece of this experimental format: a somewhat highbrow cabaret-style variety show which combines choreographed street ballads (it is likely that Finnegan's Wake is chosen to allude to 1939's publication of *Finnegans Wake*) with comedy sketches, Shakespeare and a rare fragment by Wilde, all pivoting around the 'torturous roguery' of Myles at which Mac Liammóir claims he 'laughed till the tears came' even on the 'seventh rehearsal'.⁵⁵ O'Nolan's close association with the Gate and the Edwards-Mac Liammóir partnership and production company (a letter shows he spends at least one evening at Edwards's home) indicates a closer relationship to the Dublin avant-garde theatre scene than is posited by Solomon's essay (which suggests that O'Nolan is somewhat oblivious to continental theatrical developments in the 1930s and

⁵² Myles na gCopaleen, 'Shows and Showers, in "Thirst", part of "Jack-in-the-Box", Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43', 5 (p. 5).

⁵³ Programme in "Thirst", part of "Jack-in-the-Box", Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43', 6-8 (p. 6).

⁵⁴ "Thirst", part of "Jack-in-the-Box", Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43', pp. 7-8.

⁵⁵ Michael Mac Liammóir, 'For Those Responsible', in "Thirst", part of "Jack-in-the-Box", Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43', 1, 12 (p. 12).

1940s).⁵⁶ Edwards and Mac Liammóir, who met in Dublin in 1927 and set up the Gate (Edwards was Irish but English-born and Mac Liammóir was English) represent a conduit between O’Nolan and the wider world of performative arts in London and Europe that has not been widely considered.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the sketch or cabaret format is an important mode of performance for many twentieth-century avant-garde movements earlier in the century, especially for Zurich Dada and its ‘Club Voltaire’.⁵⁸ The early association of the popular variety stage with the avant-garde is proclaimed by ‘the only intelligible Futurist’, F. T. Marinetti, in a *Daily Mail* article of 21 November 1913 entitled ‘The Meaning of the Music Hall’.⁵⁹ Marinetti praises this ‘futuristic wonder’ as a break with the conventions of realism or historical reconstruction and ‘the only kind of theatre where the public does not remain static and stupidly passive, but participates noisily in the action’.⁶⁰ The role of cabaret-style performances for the avant-garde as a point of contact with the public provides the background for the project of the Gate theatre, even if, as Edwards acknowledges, the Gate sees itself as a venue for ‘legitimate Theatre’ only experimenting with the ‘Revue’.⁶¹ The theatre is the home of the self-identifying avant-garde in Ireland more than painting or poetry in the 1930s and early 1940s, especially up to the point that the developments in visual arts discussed in the next chapter take place. For example, one of the only examples of a declaredly avant-garde magazine published in Ireland during the O’Nolan circle’s time at UCD is *Motley*, the Gate’s monthly periodical which is backed by Lord Longford and published between 1932 and 1934. In 1932, one of its contributors is described in a prefatory note as being of the opinion that the Gate is ‘the only hope

⁵⁶ O’Nolan writes ‘I’ve lost a cigarette case. Did I by any chance leave it in your place the other night?’ in a letter to Hilton Edwards, 6 November 1942, (*L*, p. 129); Solomon, p. 44;

⁵⁷ See Edwards’s account of this in ‘Why the Dublin Gate Theatre?’, *Motley*, 1.1 (1932), p. 3

⁵⁸ According to Rex W. Last, “‘Cabaret’ stressed the informal, mixed-media nature of the performances; and “‘Voltaire” was an assertion of political unorthodoxy. The object of the exercise was to provide both a platform for the creative artist in exile and a channel of communication with the public at large’. *German Dadaist Literature: Kurt Schwitters, Hugo Ball, Hans Arp* (New York: Twayne, 1973), p. 88.

⁵⁹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, ‘The Meaning of the Music Hall’, *Daily Mail*, 6. Republished as ‘In Praise of Variety Theatre’ in *The Mask: A Quarterly Journal of the Art of the Theatre* in January 1914.

⁶⁰ Marinetti, ‘The Meaning of the Music Hall’, 6.

⁶¹ Hilton Edwards, “‘Jack-in-the-Box” and the Future’ in “‘Thirst”, part of “‘Jack-in-the-Box”, Dublin Gate Theatre programme, 1942-43’, 1.

for an Avant Garde Theatre movement in Ireland'.⁶² In the 1940s, the mantle of *Motley* is taken on by Sean and Margaret Dorman in their magazine, *Commentary*, which focuses on theatre, literature and art and likewise pays close attention to the Gate, regularly carrying features written by Edwards or Mac Liammóir. This partnership directly co-creates *Thirst* and *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* with O'Nolan, and the letters show a similarly close collaboration with the Dublin theatre scene in the case of *Faustus Kelly*. O'Nolan writes parts of that play specifically for certain Abbey players after he becomes friends with Edwards, and pitches him *Faustus Kelly* before receiving the commission to adapt *The Insect Play*.⁶³ In 20 June 1942, O'Nolan describes *Faustus Kelly* to Edwards as paralleling the Faust theme 'closely throughout on what is meant to be an uproarious plane' (*L*, p. 119). By excavating the performance context of *Thirst* and O'Nolan's associations with the coterie around the Gate Theatre, we reveal his dramatic work to be no less of a collaboration, influenced by the European avant-garde, than previous chapters reveal of his prose.

5.5. 'Complex seeing'

In order to make the case that O'Nolan's drama can be related to the politically engaged theatre of European avant-garde with more precision, this chapter will make use of a conceptual framework based on what Bertolt Brecht describes as the progressive or 'epic theatre'. The chapter doesn't propose that O'Nolan consciously practices the Brechtian method or even that he knows Brecht's work directly. Instead, the influences for O'Nolan's theatrical practices discussed in this chapter are the plays of the Čapek brothers, Denis Johnston and Bernard Shaw. However, Brecht's epic theatre is deployed here as a useful characterization of programmatic principles that flow through the progressive theatre of figures including Brecht, the Čapeks, Kraus, Shaw and Ernst Toller. Brecht describes epic theatre in the most simple sense as theatre that 'appeals less to the spectators' emotions than to their reason. The spectator is not supposed to share in the experiences of the characters

⁶² 'Séan', 'A Workers' Theatre', *Motley*, 1.4, September 1932, p. 3.

⁶³ Letter to Ernest Blythe of 22 August 1942, *L*, p. 124; letters to Hilton Edwards, October to November 1942, *L*, pp. 125–28.

but to question them, dispute them'.⁶⁴ The ethics of epic theatre require that the performance doesn't manipulate the audience through its emotions but allows space for rational contemplation of the situations on stage through a sequence of devices which open up a critical distance between the audience and the performance. In a manuscript unpublished during his lifetime about the epic theatre, Brecht provides two 'schemes' to distinguish his instructional style of 'epic form' from the 'dramatic form' he claims to be replacing:

<i>Dramatic form</i>	<i>Epic form</i>
The stage portrays an incident	It narrates an incident
Involves spectators in an action	Turns them into observers but
consumes their activity	arouses their activity
enables them to have feelings	forces them to make decisions
communicates experiences	communicates knowledge. ⁶⁵

In Walter Benjamin's 1939 article about the principles of Brecht's epic theatre, he adds another characteristic which is important for the analysis in this chapter. Epic theatre requires a plot based on unsensational subject matter, such that it doesn't provoke the emotions of the audience with scandal or novelty. This restriction means that 'an old story will often do more for it than a new one'.⁶⁶ An example of Brecht's epic theatre is *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), an adaptation of John Gay's eighteenth-century musical comedy *The Beggar's Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill, which is first performed in 1928. The most obvious 'epic' device that audiences encounter in this production is a series of boards with scene titles that explain exactly what will happen in each scene before it starts. Brecht describes these as boards as a means of enabling '[complex] seeing' which 'compel and enable actors to achieve a

⁶⁴ Bertolt Brecht, 'Epic Theatre and its Difficulties' in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kung, trans. by Jack Davis, Romy Fursland, Steve Giles, Victoria Hill, Kristopher Imbrigotta, Marc Silberman and John Willet, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 44–46 (p. 45).

⁶⁵ Brecht, 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction' (1936), *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 130–39 (p. 133).

⁶⁶ Benjamin, 'What Is the Epic Theater', trans. by Harry Zohn in *Selected Writings*, IV, p. 303. On p. 303 Benjamin refers to Brecht's 'The Fourth Wall of China', published (according to his own note), in *Life and Letters Today*, 125.6 (1936).

new style'.⁶⁷ No longer spellbound by the action, the audience becomes 'a theatre full of experts, just as there are sports arenas full of experts' and the actors are forced to make the play 'striking by entirely different means'.⁶⁸ Yet what is less apparent from the way that Brecht theoretically justifies his epic theatre are its hugely comic results. The original device of lending upper class speech and mannerisms to beggars and thieves in Gay's *Beggar's Opera* is turned into a remarkable satire of bourgeois psychology in *The Threepenny Opera*. These performances are accentuated by its often lewd dialogue, which provides for a reliable sequence of gags. Whilst sympathetic responses to the characters' plights are made impossible, the audience is nevertheless actively involved in the situation and its thinking processes through their laughter.

Brecht's uproarious humour and wit bring his undertaking to destabilize the conventional theatre and renovate its objectives close to O'Nolan's own subversive project, especially as it has been characterized in this thesis. Whilst, as stated, there is no evidence that he or his collaborators in the Myles plays are directly familiar with Brecht at this time, the impulse towards an 'epic theatre' does not develop in isolation; O'Nolan and his circle encounter Brechtian approaches to character and defamiliarization through a set of other influences.⁶⁹ In 1934 there is an Abbey Theatre production of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, which is probably why Myles refers to Pirandello as 'the daddy of all the Abbey crowd' in *Cruiskeen Lawn* (CL, 30 July 1948, p. 3).⁷⁰ The Pirandello production is just one example of how the Dublin theatre scene, as opposed to magazine or novel publishing, is the main institutional home for any kind of Irish modernist or avant-garde practice in the 1920s to 1940s, as discussed in the foregoing section. This status explains the Brechtian ring of *At Swim's* manifesto for the novel as a 'self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity', where the narrator suggests that the novel is 'inferior to the play inasmuch as it

⁶⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*' in *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. by Desmond Vesey (New York: Glover Press, 1960), p. 99.

⁶⁸ Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, p. 99.

⁶⁹ Siobhán O'Gorman reveals that whilst Edwards and Mac Liammóir were the first to 'stage Brecht's work in Ireland' this did not take place until 1959 in her paper 'From the Neo-Elizabethan to the Brechtian? The Dublin Gate Theatre's Scenography post-1950', delivered at the Irish Theatrical Diaspora Conference (Gate Theatre Dublin, 1 May 2015).

⁷⁰ Abbey Theatre archive, <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/production_detail/2239/> [accessed 11 January 2020].

lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters' whereas the play is 'consumed in a wholesome fashion by large masses' (CN, p. 21).⁷¹

The most important link between progressive theatre and the O'Nolan circle is the playwright Denis Johnston. A letter sent by Niall Sheridan to Niall Montgomery in 1939 indicates Montgomery's personal familiarity with Johnston, who helps to edit *Motley* and who Sheridan thinks can help get his 'Civic Guard' story produced as a one act radio-play (likely to be the story that *Esquire* publishes in the same year as 'A Matter of Life and Death', as discussed in chapter four).⁷² Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* brings the defamiliarization techniques and burlesque of progressive theatre to the Irish stage as a Dublin Gate Theatre Production for the Peacock Theatre on Abbey Street on 3 July 1929, with Mac Liammóir in the leading role.⁷³ The play is full of humour and wry quotation. Its plot puts an actor playing nationalist hero Robert Emmet in a production within the play into an accidental concussion after he is struck by an actor playing a British redcoat. The actor playing Emmet, referred to as 'The Speaker', then experiences a dream sequence where, dazedly continuing to quote his lines from the originally intended play, has a series of encounters with modern Dubliners which '[oppose] the static idealizations of nationalism with the sordid reality of materialistic Dublin'.⁷⁴ Johnston describes its 'expressionist tricks' as 'at the time of writing, a fairly original type of play', acknowledging the influence only of George Kaufmann and Marc Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback* (1924) and 'a continental satire called *The Land of Many Names* that I once saw in the "twenties"', a play by Josef Čapek.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Abbey Theatre archive <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/production_detail/2239 /> [accessed 21 September 2019]. Long also notes, in relation to this manifesto, that 'the narrator writes novel-as-Brechtian-play' (p. 12).

⁷² Undated letter from Niall Sheridan to Niall Montgomery, NLI, Niall Montgomery Collection, MS 50, 118/26/2.

⁷³ Denis Johnston, *The Dramatic Works of Denis Johnston* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1977), pp. 17–18, 20.

⁷⁴ Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899 – 1999: Forms and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 108.

⁷⁵ Welch, p. 107.

By centring the action around a dream sequence in the mind of a concussed actor who is playing Robert Emmet, Ireland's 'generic patriot', Johnston's play enacts its own version of Brecht's reconfiguration of the relationship between actor and character by foregrounding the actor's struggle with the part he is playing.⁷⁶ Johnston says that Emmet's lines are 'made up almost entirely from lines by Mangan, Moore, Ferguson, Kickham, Todhunter, and the romantic school of nineteenth century Irish poets'.⁷⁷ As well as mirroring on the level of the script the Brechtian preference for reusing old and familiar stories, this compositional strategy of mixing literary quotation with street slang can be compared to the progressive theatre of Karl Kraus, who writes in his preface to *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind* - 1922) that '[the] most improbable conversations conducted here were spoken word for word; the most lurid fantasies are quotations'.⁷⁸ Johnston's send-up of nationalist clichés by having Emmet walk among modern-day Dubliners prefigures the way that Finn and Sweeny mingle with Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan in *At Swim*, and the play's significance for O'Nolan is also signalled by the fact that, according to a claim by Johnston recorded by Welch, his play is originally titled *Rhapsody in Green* when it is first submitted to the Abbey in 1928 (and apparently rejected with the note 'The old lady says "No!"', referring to Lady Gregory's dislike for it). This anecdote about the original title, whether true or not, strongly suggests a nod towards Johnston by O'Nolan in the naming of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green: The Insect Play*.⁷⁹

An even closer connection is suggested by the fact that in December 1941, *Commentary* publishes a profile of Hilton Edwards which describes Johnston as the adaptor of *The Insect Play*, not O'Nolan. After another Christmas special for the Gate, the article says that Edwards plans to go the Gaiety 'where he hopes to open with "The Insect Play" of Capek, which Denis Johnston is adapting to a new idea of Hilton Edwards, whereby the play is put into an Irish setting, thus localising its humour'.⁸⁰ Although it's unclear whether Johnston had started work on the play or

⁷⁶ Curtis Canfield, 'A Note on the Nature of Expressionism and Denis Johnston's Plays' (1936) in Joseph Ronsley (ed.), *Denis Johnston: A Retrospective*, Irish Literary Studies 8 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1981), pp. 38–48 (p. 39).

⁷⁷ Johnston, *Dramatic Works*, p. 17.

⁷⁸ Karl Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*, trans. by Fred Bridgam and Edward Timms (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 1.

⁷⁹ Welch, pp. 107–108; Johnston, *Dramatic Works*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ Hilton Edwards, 'Shaw, Ibsen and Sybil Thorndyke', *Commentary* 2.3 (March 1943), 9–12 (p. 9).

not, the article reveals that O’Nolan inherits the project from Johnston and adapts the play to local settings under clear directions from Edwards, whose vision for it is already well-articulated in late 1941. In March 1943, Edwards explains how O’Nolan has been commissioned to execute his and Mac Liammóir’s vision:

Myles na gCopaleen has made us a version which gives it a tremendous national and local importance. At Micheal MacLiammoir’s suggestion, the action takes place in St. Stephen’s Green. Now, at last, after some difficulty, we have cast the ‘characters,’ the beetles, the ants, the parasites, etc., and there is even a St. Stephen’s Green duck. The play depends a great deal on accents, Dublin accents, Cork accents and Belfast accents, the last, strangely enough, hard to find. Myles na gCopaleen has kept pretty strictly to the form and intention of the original, but has treated it freely, with the result that we have an Irish *Insect Play*.⁸¹

Once again, the collaborative aspect of O’Nolan’s work becomes important for how we understand its motives and influences. Theatrical drama is an inherently collective art form, requiring the collaboration of a large team to produce it. O’Nolan’s decisions regarding his plays are not entirely his own but rather the result of working closely with established figures in the avant-garde wing of Dublin’s theatre scene. The correspondence between O’Nolan and Montgomery also suggests that he acted as a trusted reviewer of the *The Insect Play* (L, p. 131).

Another link between O’Nolan and Brechtian practices is Bernard Shaw, whom Brecht praises in an article entitled ‘Ovation for Shaw’ he publishes in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* in July 1926, when Shaw turned seventy.⁸² Identifying Shaw as a ‘progressive dramatic writer’, Brecht writes that his dramatic works ‘unflinchingly appealed to the intellect’ and that ‘in order to have a play, [Shaw] invents some complications which provide his characters with opportunities to vent their opinions extensively and have them clash with ours’.⁸³ In the ‘Epistle Dedicatory’ to *Man and Superman*, Shaw writes that ‘[this] is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose

⁸¹ Edwards, ‘Shaw, Ibsen and Sybil Thorndyke’, p. 9.

⁸² Bertolt Brecht, ‘Ovation for Shaw’, translated by Gerhard H. W. Zuther, *Modern Drama*, 2.2 (Summer 1959), 184–187.

⁸³ Brecht, ‘Ovation for Shaw’, p. 185.

recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap'.⁸⁴ This sentiment is perhaps part of what appeals to Brecht, who admires a 'Shavian terror' which insists 'on the prerogative of every man to act decently, logically, and with a sense of humor'.⁸⁵ The Shavian ethos of deploying humour as a weapon to undermine the immoral and illogical is what motivates O'Nolan's use of something like what Fredric Jameson describes as Brechtian 'pragmatism'.⁸⁶ It is unsurprising, then, that two decades on from Brecht's article, Myles na gCopaleen marks the occasion of Shaw's ninetieth birthday, and the publication – in huge print-runs of 100,000 copies each – of ten volumes of his work, with a column entitled 'Myself and Bernard Shaw'. Myles claims that today both he and Shaw are ninety years old and that they have not spoken since going 'two ways in 1922', when 'Shaw, hiding in London, was writing his "plays"' whilst Myles made the 'decision to die for my country' (*CL*, 26 July 1946, p. 5).⁸⁷ This joke recalls the moment in *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* when the speaker, to his consternation, is informed by an old man that he has 'died for Ireland'.⁸⁸ Although this thesis is sadly unable to deal in detail with the comparison between Shavian and Mylesian satire and polemic, this brief discussion helps to show that Shaw's plays present another form of progressive theatre which is available, like that of the Čapeks and Johnston, as a model for the Myles plays. O'Nolan participates in a broad turn towards 'complex seeing' in the theatre of the first half of the twentieth century.

5.6. 'The Fausticity of Kelly'

This thesis has argued that a combination of highly synthetic or 'interfusional' heteroglossia – what might be seen as literary montage – and the sharper juxtaposition of different modes of discourse – which might be viewed as closer to collage – is characteristic of much of O'Nolan's work. His plays are no exception and, as Gibbons suggests, this impulse in Irish writers is partially rooted in the consciousness of a traumatic and fragmented historical process that encourages the

⁸⁴ Bernard Shaw, 'Epistle Dedicatory' in *Man and Superman* (London: Penguin, 1946), p. xxxiii.

⁸⁵ Brecht, 'Ovation for Shaw', p. 185.

⁸⁶ Jameson presents Brecht's didacticism as the teaching of a 'characteristically Brechtian type of pragmatism' wherein 'you turn a problem into its solution'. *Brecht and Method*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2011), p. 31.

⁸⁷ Publication note in Shaw, *Man and Superman*, p. i.

⁸⁸ Johnston, *Dramatic Works*, p. 61.

use of proto-modernist montage effects in Irish fiction and drama, such as in the ‘barn-storming melodramas of Dion Boucicault’, who provides O’Nolan with the Myles na gCopaleen name, where ‘the abrupt transitions from levity to tragedy, high-jinks to high-seriousness, forced Boucicault to revolutionize the use of stage machinery to facilitate sudden shifts in the action’.⁸⁹ In O’Nolan’s drama, as elsewhere in his work, the operation of montage on different levels means that at some times multiple ways of speaking are blended together in double-voiced speech acts, whereas at others there is an ‘abrupt transition’ between conflicting or competing modes and discursive traditions.

This dual strategy, functioning in tandem with O’Nolan’s preference for episodic narrative set-ups, permits multiple levels of literary structure to operate simultaneously in his work. In a typical move, an ironic commentary of one mode of discourse upon another is partially negated by the absorption of that mode by the object of its commentary, or vice versa, only for the succeeding episode to call into play a new perspective. The social content of O’Nolan’s drama is not detachable from the different levels of montage technique at work in its formal construction. These techniques enable the text to provoke questions without expressing political opinions directly or, conversely, without distancing itself from social actuality. The use of montage also enables O’Nolan’s work to conduct sustained and serious engagements with figures of literary influence which are also ludic and even flippant. What might seem to be a dismissal of a certain writer, source, or tradition at one level often camouflages a more sophisticated response at some other level.

In chapter three this strategy was shown to be at work in relation to *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Die Harzreise*. In the case of *Faustus Kelly*, the ‘old story’ that O’Nolan reproduces is explicitly that of the folkloric theme of a deal with the devil. The specific debt to Goethe’s version of this tale is, like that of Heine in *At Swim*, an influence that appears tenuous at first but emerges as a central component when a deeper level of analysis is applied. This chapter now explores the potential of the Faust myth to galvanize a reading of *Faustus Kelly* as an intertextual and satirical work which is in dialogue with Goethe and the surge in retellings of the Faust story in the 1930s and 1940s during the rise of fascism. These retellings include Karl Kraus’s modernist montage-text, *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* (*The Third Walpurgis Night* – 1933, published 1952), Thomas Mann’s novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947), Paul Valéry’s short play

⁸⁹ Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p. 167.

Mon Faust (1946) and Dorothy Sayers's play, *The Devil to Pay* (1939). By placing it in this context, this section of the chapter reads *Faustus Kelly* as a critique of opportunist rhetoric and its attendant moral delinquency. O'Nolan's satire, this chapter proposes, comprises one strand in a web of similarly politicized Faustian works written during the 1930s and 1940s which engage with the Faustian *topos* to present sceptical encounters with the themes of Enlightenment and modernity. By bringing in this European standpoint, the chapter builds on existing readings which examine O'Nolan's self-professed 'Abbey play' mainly in terms of its local Irish context.⁹⁰ This chapter goes further by proposing specific political targets for O'Nolan's satire: seeking to demonstrate that the portrayal of Kelly parodies both the rhetoric and political programme of Fianna Fáil in the 1926–1932 period and that of far-right Irish nationalist groups in the early 1940s. In doing so, the play relates the Irish political experience to the rise of anti-Semitism and fascist movements in Europe.

O'Nolan studied Goethe's *Faust* when reading German for the final year of his undergraduate degree, in 1931–32. The lack of critical discussion of *Faustus Kelly* as a text which is situated in the Faust tradition may owe something to the influence of Cronin's biographical account of this period, when he claims that O'Nolan

speaks of having to take it on trust that Goethe's play was a 'masterpiece'. He found *Faust* turgid, he says, when he read it at UCD, but acknowledges that this may have been due to his knowledge of German being very poor. If it had improved afterwards, Myles would certainly have been the first to say so.⁹¹

Cronin's account is much more widely available than the source for these remarks, which he doesn't cite: a short article O'Nolan publishes as Myles na gCopaleen in January 1963 for the *RTV Guide* entitled 'The Fausticity of Kelly' to accompany the radio adaptation of the play by H. L. Morrow broadcast on 26 January 1963. Along

⁹⁰ O'Nolan describes *Faustus Kelly* as written 'for the Abbey' or an 'Abbey play' in letters to Michael Walsh on 31 May 1942 and Hilton Edwards on 20 June 1942, *L*, pp. 118–19). Taaffe argues that in *Faustus Kelly* O'Nolan is 'struggling into the motley of the Abbey comedy' (Taaffe, p. 178). Long suggests that *Faustus Kelly*'s regional accents 'fell afoul' of a confusion with 'stage brogue' in her essay, "No more drunk, truculent, witty, celtic, dark, desperate, amorous paddies!": Brian O'Nolan and the Irish stereotype', p. 43.

⁹¹ Cronin, p. 69. The same account is repeated on p. 133.

with a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column of 1954 which is discussed below, this article is a key document for our understanding of O’Nolan’s positioning of the play in relation to its sources (or at least how he represents them in later years). If the article is cited more thoroughly, it becomes apparent that O’Nolan’s engagement with the Faust myth is more substantial than Cronin suggests. He begins with a succinct but astute history of the myth. Faust, says O’Nolan,

first appeared (whether man or myth) in the Middle Ages, about the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Intrinsically, though, the legend is substantively of Jewish origin, dating back to about the beginning of the Christian era. The latter-day manifestation of Faust may be said to date from mention of him by Johann Mannel (died 1560), historian to Maximilian II: he called Faust ‘a disgraceful beast and sewer of many devils’. [...] The dramatic potentiality of such a character, whether a necromancer or charlatan, was self-evident. At Frankfurt in 1587 Johan Spies published his ‘Historia von D. Johann Fausten,’ a work reprinted many times and pirated. Similar works quickly followed but, as for drama, the pioneer was Christopher Marlowe, and his play was published in 1604. That and many other continental plays on the same theme ended with the damnation of Faust, but the advent of, first, Lessing and then Goethe led to the cleansing of the Faust legend in the interests of elevating the minds of audiences by arranging for Faust’s eventual salvation.⁹²

Only at this point, having taken pains to elaborate on the myth’s history, does O’Nolan make the remarks Cronin cites about his first encounter with Goethe as an undergraduate:

My own first confrontation with this shady man was at U.C.D. when I took German as a subsidiary subject for an arts degree and found myself pitched headlong into Goethe’s masterpiece.

⁹² Myles na Gopaleen, ‘The Fausticity of Kelly’, *RTV Guide*, 25 January 1963, 12–13.

I say ‘masterpiece’ for as such it is universally acknowledged, though I found the text pretty turgid: but then, my knowledge of German was very poor.⁹³

After situating *Faustus Kelly* in this wider European tradition, O’Nolan’s article emphasizes the political context of his version, taking a pot-shot at Cork politicians who are satirized by the figure of the Town Clerk in the play:

Many years afterwards I entered the civil service (from which I was later to escape, thank God) and for some seven years my duties as a private secretary necessitated almost daily attendance at Leinster House.

Garrulity is a feeble word to describe what I encountered in Dáil Eireann, and my innocence at the beginning may be judged from the fact that I marvelled that a certain poorly-dressed deputy could speak French so rapidly that I could not grasp his meaning.

Some weeks went by before I realised he was speaking English of the Cork intonation.

The play *Faustus Kelly* arose somehow from that Leinster House gab [...].⁹⁴

O’Nolan concludes by praising the actors involved in the production and closes the article with an ambivalent reference to negative opinions about the play: ‘Many people told me afterwards in strict confidence that it was a very bad play. Maybe. I personally find Shakespeare’s *King Lear* unendurable’.⁹⁵

O’Nolan’s account of his ‘first confrontation’ in this article does not quite square with the archival evidence, which indicates that whilst he may have laboured his way through *Faust* in German, he also read it as an undergraduate in English. In 1987, two years prior to the first publication of Cronin’s biography, Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp had already presented photographic proof that O’Nolan was not constrained by the language barrier he attests to later. They print an image of his signed copy of Lefevre’s nineteenth-century English translation of *Faust Part One*, in

⁹³ ‘The Fausticity of Kelly’, p. 13.

⁹⁴ ‘The Fausticity of Kelly’, p. 13.

⁹⁵ ‘The Fausticity of Kelly’, p. 13.

its second edition of 1843, dated to 1932, the final year of O’Nolan’s BA degree.⁹⁶ There is also evidence to suggest that O’Nolan became more proficient at German than he attests to in the article. His personal library contains some of the books bought for his undergraduate degree: a German-language edition of *Goethe’s Poems* along with German editions of works by Heinrich Heine and Friedrich Schiller, all inscribed with his signature and dated to between 1930 and 1931.⁹⁷ The annotations indicate a rapidly developing knowledge of German in this period. For example, in his copy of Heine’s *Die Harzreise*, O’Nolan annotates the text with English translations, but in his volumes of Friedrich Schiller’s *Wallenstein*, he begins to annotate the text with cross-references and notes written in German. As an aside, it is intriguing to bear in mind that Samuel Beckett also makes extensive notes on Goethe’s *Faust* in the early 1930s in advance of his own trip to Nazi Germany in 1936-37.⁹⁸ According to his passport stamps and a book of postcards, O’Nolan himself travelled to Germany between August and September in 1936.⁹⁹

O’Nolan’s reading is subsequently mobilized in dozens of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns which refer to German culture or are written partially in German, including the nine published in the 1940s which specifically reference Goethe.¹⁰⁰ Sometimes it is a light touch. For example, in December 1945 Myles provides a source when the Brother asks him: ‘Did you ever hear that sayin’ The Dead Ride Fast? / *Yes. It is from Goethe. Die Toten reiten schnell*’.¹⁰¹ In May 1946 Goethe is listed in an eclectic assortment of poets Myles claims to have influenced, including the French Renaissance poets

⁹⁶ There is an image of the signed copy, dated to 1932, in Costello, p. 46.

⁹⁷ Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, ‘An Inventory of Brian O’Nolan’s Library at Boston College,’ *Parish Review*, 2.1 (Fall 2013), 34–47 (pp. 37, 41); Flann O’Brien Collection, Burns Library, Boston College: Heinrich Heine, *Sämmtliche Werke* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1885); Heinrich Heine, *Die Harzreise*, Alphonse Naus Van Daell (ed.) (London: D.C. Heath & Co., 1929); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe’s Poems*, Charles Harris (ed.) (Boston; New York; Chicago: D.C. Heath & Co., 1899); Friedrich Schiller, *Wallenstein: Ein Trauerspiel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901).

⁹⁸ Dirk Van Hulle, ‘Samuel Beckett’s “Faust” Notes,’ *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 16 (2006), 283–97.

⁹⁹ *BC*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ *CL*, 28 November 1944, p. 3; *CL*, 5 January 1948, p. 4; *CL*, 15 March 1950, p. 4; *CL*, 20 December 1945, p. 4; *CL*, 10 November 1945, p. 3; *CL*, 22 December 1948, p. 5; *CL*, 29 August 1949, p. 4; *CL*, 29 November 1948, p. 2; *CL*, 5 November 1948, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ *CL*, 20 December 1945, p. 4.

François Villon and Pierre de Ronsard, the Irish war poet Francis Ledwidge, the Austro-Hungarian modernist Rainer Maria Rilke and the Latin poet Catallus.¹⁰² In 1948 Myles writes several columns that quote from the edition of *Goethe's Poems* he purchases in 1931. They show him deploying Goethe as an example of German literature to complicate and subvert debates which relate to Irish national aspirations. In May he quotes Goethe's epigram, 'Demut' ('Humility') and a stanza from Goethe's poem, 'Rastlose Liebe' ('Restless Love') as part of a wry send-up of the commemorations of the Irish Rebellion of 1798.¹⁰³ In November he invokes Goethe's verse in this context again, commenting on criticism of Ireland's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth in 1948 by quoting a German proverb he presents as lines from Goethe: 'Kommst du in des Königs Haus / Geh blind hinein und stumm heraus' (Should you come into the King's house / Go blindly in and mutely out).¹⁰⁴ In December 1948 he begins a column about the publication of *The Pillar of Cloud* by Francis Stuart, an Irish modernist novelist who works on propaganda broadcasts in Nazi Germany during the war and subsequently returns to the Irish academy, by presenting 'a good wan from the works of W. B. Goethe' and combining the beginning of Goethe's poem, 'In das Stammbuch von Friedrich Maximilian Moors' (In the family album of Friedrich Maximilian Moors) with the end of W. B. Yeats's poem, 'September 1913'.¹⁰⁵ O'Nolan consistently deploys Goethe as part of a montage strategy which complicates and historicizes nationalist feelings by generating what Catherine Flynn has described elsewhere as 'a series of overlapping identifications'; in this case between Irish and German literary history.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² *CL*, 15 May 1946, p. 4.

¹⁰³ *Goethe's Poems*, pp. 132, 41. 'Demut' translated in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Selected Poems Volume I*, trans. and ed. by Christopher Middleton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 238. Title of 'Rastlose Liebe' translated in *Poems of Goethe*, ed. and trans. by Edgar Alfred Browning (New York: Hurst & Co, 1874), p. 60

¹⁰⁴ *CL*, 29 November 1948, p. 2. My translation.

¹⁰⁵ 'Es hat der Autor, wenn er schreibt / So etwas Gewisses, das ihn treibt / Den Trieb hatt auch der Alexander / Und all die Helden mit einander -- / All that delirium of the brave -- / Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave!' (*CL*, 22 December 1948, p. 5, citing from *Goethe's Poems*, p. 1 and W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 159). My translation of the title.

¹⁰⁶ Flynn, pp. 85–86.

Cruiskeen Lawn also refers to *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe's play exists in two versions: the A Text, published between 1604 and 1611; and the substantially edited and censored B Text, published in 1616.¹⁰⁷ *Doctor Faustus* is broadcast on BBC radio on 28 November 1942, just two months before *Faustus Kelly* opens.¹⁰⁸ In 1944 Myles discusses the Faust plays of the 'German composer Gounod Meyer – or was it Goethe Meyer' alongside 'another by Maher Lowe, the Limerick genius'. In this column, Myles says that Faust is a 'fascinating subject' and, alluding to *Faustus Kelly*, invites the placement of his own work in the tradition when he writes that 'I often thought it would make a damn good play if one changed it about a bit, give it a sort of Irish atmosphere' (CL, 28 November 1944, p. 3). As O'Nolan observes in 1963, a common source for Marlowe and Goethe is the *Historia Von. D. John Fausten: dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer and Schwartzkünstler*, a chapbook published in Frankfurt in 1587 by Johann Spies. It is 'a collection of stories rather than a history of Faust's life, a montage of episodes which shows a man who seeks knowledge and pleasure at any price'.¹⁰⁹ This popular edition is translated into English in the same year by an unknown writer, P. F. Gent, as 'The Historie of the damnable life, and deserved death of *Doctor John Faustus*', the version which Marlowe uses for his model.¹¹⁰ In turn, Marlowe's own play is translated and widely performed in Europe. By the time that, as O'Nolan observes, first Lessing and then Goethe decided to work on the subject in the late eighteenth century, the Marlovian Faust had evolved into increasingly pantomime-like iterations, including a puppet-show.¹¹¹ The choice of Faust for a play seems to be O'Nolan's own: he pitches the idea to Edwards before it is suggested that he adapt *The Insect Play* (L, pp. 125–28). It's a deliberate decision to retell an old story rather than invent a new one in the spirit of Benjamin's 1939 definition of Brecht's epic theatre.

Goethe spends his entire life working on his *Faust*, leaving four versions of the text which bear witness to his evolving aesthetic prerogatives. The first, known as

¹⁰⁷ Roma Gill (ed.), 'Introduction' in Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., 'Radio Programmes', *Irish Press*, 28 November 1942, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Klaus L. Berghahn, 'Georg Johann Faust: the myth and its history' in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (eds), *Our Faust? : Roots and ramifications of a modern German myth* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 3–21 (p. 8).

¹¹⁰ Gill, p. 8.

¹¹¹ Berghahn, p. 10.

the *Urfaust*, which ‘Goethe brought to Weimar in 1775, read to small circles, but never published’ is ‘a bourgeois tragedy in typical Storm-and-Stress fashion’.¹¹² The second is *Faust: Ein Fragment*, which Goethe publishes as part of his collected works in 1790. In 1806 he completes *Faust Part One*, which integrates the Gretchen story that had formed the principal subject of the earlier versions into something resembling the *Faust* myth and adds scenes including the first Walpurgis Night episode.¹¹³ In 1832, the year of Goethe’s death, he publishes *Faust: Der Tragödie zweiter Teil in fünf Akten* (*The Tragedy’s Second Part in Five Acts*). This vastly more complex work includes the sections which meditate on the relationship between human culture and the natural world, including the second Walpurgis Night and the closing scenes in which Faust reclaims land from the sea to build a new territory where citizens can live ‘[not] safely, but in free resilience’ (l. 11564).

An analysis of the plot of *Faustus Kelly* shows that it is more closely modelled on Goethe’s *Faust Part One* than any other source material. In *Faust Part One* and *Faustus Kelly*, as Zuzana Neubauerová has also observed, Faust strives to win the affections of a woman named Margaret, who ultimately abandons him in disgust at his behaviour.¹¹⁴ This is in line with what is likely to have been O’Nolan’s main textual source, the Lefevre translation of *Part One* discussed above.

Table 2 – Comparison of plot elements in Goethe’s *Faust* and *Faustus Kelly*

Summary	<i>Faust Part One (Lefevre)</i>	<i>Faustus Kelly</i>
MAN MEETS MEPHISTO	Following the ‘Prelude to Faust’ debate between a theatre Director, Dramatist and a Facetious Friend and then the ‘Prologue in Heaven’, we meet Faust in his professional context with his books in Scene One where he first summons up a ‘Spirit’. Faust is interrupted by the ‘brainless lad’	Kelly signs the pact with the devil in the dumb-show prologue sequence and in Act One he is introduced in the public, professional setting of the urban council chamber. Kelly’s behaviour is aloof from his colleagues, who either despise him or, in the case of Town Clerk, act as

¹¹² Berghahn, p. 16.

¹¹³ Berghahn, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ Zuzana Neubauerová, ‘An Analysis of Selected Plays by Flann O’Brien’ (PhD thesis, Univerzita Palackého of Olomouci, 2015), <www.theses.cz/id/pzjjsh/Thesis_Neub.pdf> [accessed 11 September 2019], p. 18.

	<p>Wagner. In Scene Two, the next morning, Faust and Wagner walk amongst the people outside the town gates. Mephistopheles appears as a black poodle who follows Faust home. In Scene Three the poodle transforms itself and Mephistopheles appears ‘clad as travelling student’ (50). In Scene Four Faust signs the blood pact but makes it conditional on a wager about whether he can ever be absolutely fulfilled: ‘If e’er I to the moment say, / “Thou art so beauteous, rest, I pray!” / Then bind me in eternal chains’ (64).</p>	<p>his faithful servant. The Stranger is introduced as a newly appointed rate-collector. They have an agreement for the Stranger to help Kelly to be elected as a T.D, supplying: ‘money and votes and everything that is required’ (57)</p>
<p>FALLS IN LOVE WITH A GIRL CALLED MARGARET</p>	<p>In Scene Seven Faust sees the young girl called Margaret (or Gretchen) and asks Mephistopheles to help him win her heart. The rest of <i>Part One</i> revolves around their romance. Margaret is characterized by her Christian faith and this strains her relationship with Faust when she doubts that he is ‘a Christian true’ (153).</p>	<p>Kelly is courting the widow Margaret Crockett, a ‘coarse, dowdy lady of about thirty five’ (73). The Stranger has promised ‘Your love for Mrs Crockett will prosper’ (57) as part of their agreement. Margaret is a devout Christian and is suspicious of Kelly’s claims to virtuousness.</p>
<p>WHO HAS A JEALOUS BROTHER</p>	<p>In Scene Nineteen we meet Valentine, Margaret’s brother, who has arrived because he has heard that her honour, previously unparalleled, has been compromised. Valentine will finally tell Margaret she is ‘the strumpet of the town’ (171).</p>	<p>In Act Two we meet Captain James Shaw, here to ‘talk to my sister about a blighter called Kelly’ who has ‘damaged and destroyed her fair name’. He tells Kelly: ‘You have given her the reputation of a prostitute in her own town’ (75, 78).</p>
<p>MAN WINS THE DUEL</p>	<p>In the same scene, Valentine dies after fighting a duel with Faust, who</p>	<p>In Act Three Captain Shaw is defeated in the election by Kelly,</p>

...	receives demonic assistance from Mephistopheles.	who receives demonic assistance from the Stranger.
.... BUT LOSES THE GIRL	In Scene Twenty-Four, Margaret is shamed and imprisoned for the death of the child she bears by Faust. Margaret rejects his attempted rescue and as she dies, is spared by God from damnation. Faust is distraught at what he's done.	Margaret is shamed and appalled by Shaw's drunkenness, who is in 'the last blibbering stages of intoxication' and blames Kelly for it: 'You're the cause of it and you'll have to answer for it before God'. She storms out and Kelly is left 'pathetically broken' (100, 101, 103).

Sources: Page numbers refer to *Goethe's Faust: Translated into English Verse*, 2nd edn, George Lefevre (trans.), (London: D. Nutt, 1843) and Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien, Plays and Teleplays*, Daniel Keith Jernigan (ed.), (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), cited in main text as *PT*.

This comparison reveals that much of the dramatic action of O'Nolan's version is drawn from the plot which constitutes the majority of the *Urfaust* and *Faust: Ein Fragment* texts, makes up the latter half of Goethe's *Part One*, and which, Ronald Gray argues, 'has nothing essentially Faustian about it'.¹¹⁵ This subtle relationship demonstrates the predominance of Goethe's *Faust Part One* as a source text over *Faust Part Two* and the versions by Marlowe. The correspondence also highlights O'Nolan's labyrinthine approach to the interpolation of source material: the subplot which is inserted into the existing story in Goethe's *Faust Part One* becomes the main template for *Faustus Kelly*. However, O'Nolan is also clearly cognizant of the implications of the final scenes of *Faust Part Two*. At the play's close, by sparing Kelly from hell when the Stranger tears up their contract, O'Nolan also includes a form of the salvation of Faust which, as he notes in 'The Fausticity of Kelly', is pivotal in Goethe's transformation of the early modern myth.

Gray argues not only that Faust's damnation is evaded in Goethe's version but also that Goethe modifies the wager which is agreed between Faust and Mephistopheles in ways that render even the possibility of Faust's damnation uncertain. Firstly, in the 'Prologue in Heaven' scene there is a 'first wager' between

¹¹⁵ Ronald Gray, *Goethe: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 129.

Mephistopheles and God with the result that ‘in effect, Faust can never go wrong, never so wrong as to deserve damnation’.¹¹⁶ Secondly, the wager which is subsequently agreed between Faust and Mephistopheles is different in Goethe’s version:

Traditionally, Faust merely bargained away his soul for earthly power. Goethe’s Faust inserts a proviso; his soul is only to be forfeit to the devil if he ever remains satisfied with the passing moment, if he ever becomes so enamoured of such a moment that he would like it to remain his forever [...]. To make matters more difficult, Mephistopheles misunderstands Faust’s proviso and continues to talk as though the legendary pact were in operation [...] In doing this, Mephisto is acting in the role ordained for him by the Lord, of pricking Faust on to further discontent, ensuring he continues to strive.¹¹⁷

If, as Gray suggests in this interpretation, ‘striving is to be the basis on which Faust’s salvation becomes possible’, that makes Mephistopheles an accessory to Faust’s redemption instead of the agent of his damnation.¹¹⁸ Ua Laoghaire’s *Séadna*, an Irish-language retelling, draws on Goethe’s reinvention to produce a redemptive account in which the protagonist is improved morally by his encounter with the devil and is able to evade damnation (informed by a wider folk tradition of stories about outsmarting the devil which also influenced Goethe). *Séadna* is also source material for *Faustus Kelly*. The cautious use of ‘the Stranger’ to describe Mephistopheles, for example, mimics Ua Laoghaire’s substitution of a more demonic moniker for his euphemism, ‘the Black Man’.¹¹⁹

The ending of *Faustus Kelly* can be related to that of Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* inasmuch as both undertake an unravelling of the foregoing dramatic action which contrives to unexpectedly redeem Faust at the last moment. In Act Three of *Faustus Kelly*, Kelly receives a call to confirm that he has won the election but his jubilation does not last. The defeat of Captain Shaw has driven him to drink and, in her disgust,

¹¹⁶ Gray, p. 134.

¹¹⁷ Gray, pp. 137–38.

¹¹⁸ Gray, p. 139.

¹¹⁹ Peter O’Leary, *Shiana*, (Dublin: The Irish Book Company, 1916), p. 6.

Margaret blames Kelly and leaves him. Kelly's nemesis Reilly announces that he has succeeded in his attempt to foil the appointment of the Stranger as the town's rate collector. Not only is the Stranger out of a job, he is told that no one will talk to him and he will have nowhere to live. Kelly, reneging on his side of the pact, refuses to help him. As the community closes ranks against him, the Stranger loses his earlier confidence and he withers, becoming 'thoroughly scared' (*PT*, p. 113). Then Kelly's electoral victory also unravels: we are told a Guard is on his way to speak to him about 'some monkey-work [...] when the last two boxes were opened they were full of ashes'; and a petition threatens (*PT*, 113).

The play concludes with the re-entry of the Stranger, now wearing a black robe. As his lips move, excerpts from the speech of Shawn, the Town Clerk, Kelly and Reilly are ventriloquized and blended together '*with diabolical skill*'. When the Stranger speaks directly he tears up the bond signed with Kelly: 'Not for any favour ... in heaven or earth or hell ... would I take Kelly and the others with me to where I live' (*PT*, 116). Gillespie suggests that 'effective characterization is achieved' in *Faustus Kelly* 'through accents and (character-specific) rhetoric'.¹²⁰ However, Act Three reverses this process: characters dissolve into their accents and become 'a bodying forth of [...] contradictions' in Benjamin's terms. The redemption of Faust by divine intervention which O'Nolan inherits from Goethe is transfigured and posed instead as a form of perlocutionary narrative collapse: the excess of what Holloway condemns as 'blather and highfalutin oratory' overwhelms the Faustian archetype and induces a perverse form of redemption by default.¹²¹

Adorno, addressing 'the question of whether the devil won or lost the bet' in *Faust*, regards Goethe's reworking of the 'old motif of the devil cheated' as a sign not that Faust has won the bet but that 'law itself is suspended' and, he suggests enigmatically, we witness 'the disappearance of the natural order in a different order'.¹²² The new 'order' which saves Kelly is the bureaucratic labyrinth of the Irish Civil service, which causes the devil to throw his hands up in defeat. Inez Hedges, in the study *Framing Faust*, suggests that there are two main tendencies in the twentieth-century engagement with the Faust story in the wake of the ambivalence opened up by Goethe's ending to *Faust Part Two*: a negative pole represented by the motif of

¹²⁰ Gillespie, p. 34.

¹²¹ Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, p. 83.

¹²² Adorno, 'On the Final Scene of *Faust*', *Notes to Literature*, I, pp. 118–19.

Faust lost in the labyrinth, ‘an image of confusion, false starts, and frustrating returns to the point of origin’; and a positive, redemptive pole represented by the motif of the garden. As such,

[the] fate of the Faustian protagonist caught in the labyrinth seems to exemplify a skepticism concerning the impulse to know and experience everything in the name of modernity. The garden or natural setting, on the other hand, offers the promise of peace and, on occasion, an escape from the ‘Faustian bargain’.¹²³

The formal structure of O’Nolan’s conclusion takes the escape to the garden motif represented by Goethe’s redemption of his Faust and transforms it into its negative: confusion and a return to the point of origin. The nature of Kelly’s redemption implies that, as an Irish politician, he is already enmeshed in a labyrinth worse than damnation. Seeking to explain this peculiarly comic denouement, the following section of this chapter examines the language of *Faustus Kelly* alongside another Goethe intertext, *The Third Walpurgis Night* by Karl Kraus. The section presents the negative Faustian thematics of *Faustus Kelly* as a retelling which associates the rhetoric of Irish politics, for which ‘garrulity is a feeble word’, with the language politics of Europe’s descent into totalitarianism. The failure and false redemption of Kelly thereby becomes an anti-fascist gesture.

5.7. *Faustus Kelly* and fascism

Goethe’s Faust, and Goethe himself, become archetypal yet fluid figures who are subject to processes of revision, appropriation and counter-appropriation by each successive generation. Hedges writes that in the first half of the twentieth century, Faust becomes enmeshed in a ‘culture war’ between the critics who claim Goethe’s work for fascist cultural narratives and those who seek to undermine this appropriation. The right-wing nationalist accounts of the pre-Nazi period include Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s *Goethe* (1921) which ‘focuses on Goethe as a “great personality”’, laying the seeds for Georg Schott’s overtly fascist *Goethes Faust in heutiger Schau* (*Goethe’s Faust in Contemporary Perspective* – 1940), which ‘repeatedly refers

¹²³ Inez Hedges, *Framing Faust: Twentieth-Century Cultural Struggles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), p. 193.

to the “Führer Faust”.¹²⁴ These accounts share some common features, according to Karoline Kirst-Gundersen and Paul Levesque, such as Faust’s ‘essential Germanness, his “grand personality” (große Persönlichkeit), and his dedication to the “community” (Gemeinschaft)’.¹²⁵ In particular, drawing upon an interpretation of a line regarding Faust’s land reclamation project in which Faust makes the exhortation ‘[auf] freiem Grund mit freiem Volke steh’n’ ([on] acres free among free people stand’ – l. 11580), Nazi propaganda enlists Goethe and his Faust for the fascist cause. Kirst-Gundersen and Levesque offer the example of a

1937 speech, ‘Goethe in unserer Zeit,’ delivered by Reichsjugendführer Baldur von Schirach on the occasion of the Weimar festival of the German youth. Schirach, one of the few high-level Nazi functionaries to devote a public speech to Goethe, begins with the rousing cry: ‘Germans, name the unmistakeably German book, it is *Faust*. Name the unmistakeably German poet, it is Goethe’.¹²⁶

This appropriation of Faust by National Socialism does not go uncontested. In 1933 the Hölderlin scholar Wilhelm Böhm publishes *Faust der Nichtfaustische* (*Faust the Unfaustian*) which ‘discusses the discrepancy between Goethe’s dramatic character Faust and the long tradition of misinterpretations of that figure which had led to a false use of the term *Faustian*’.¹²⁷ Kirst-Gundersen, Levesque and Hedges also give the example of Ernst Beutler, the director of Frankfurt’s Goethe museum, who in 1941 ‘argues that Goethe presents Faust as a failure’ and suggests that his ‘sacrifice of the old couple Philemon and Baucis to accomplish his aims is Goethe’s warning to the German people not to be bent on conquest’.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Goethe*, 3rd ed. (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1921); Georg Schott, *Goethes Faust in heutiger Schau* (Stuttgart: Tazzelwurm Verlag, 1940), cited in Hedges, p. 48.

¹²⁵ Karoline Kirst-Gundersen and Paul Levesque, “‘Faust im Braunhemd’: Germanistik and fascism’ in Grim, and Hermand, *Our Faust?*, pp. 153–167 (p. 154).

¹²⁶ Kirst-Gundersen and Levesque, p. 158, citing Baldur von Schirach, *Goethe an uns: Einige Gedanken des großen Deutschen* (Munich/Berlin, 1938).

¹²⁷ Kirst-Gundersen and Levesque, p. 164.

¹²⁸ Hedges, p. 50, citing Ernst Beutler, ‘Goethes Faust, ein Deutsches Gedicht’ in Gerhard Fricke, Franz Koch, and Lemens Lugowski (eds), *Von Deutscher Art in Sprache und Dichtung*, 4 vols (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1941), IV, pp. 279–80.

As well as dissenting critics within Germany, writers outside of Germany who oppose the regime re-appropriate the Faust theme to construct a critique of the Nazi rise to power. The prime example of this re-appropriation is Karl Kraus and his (then unpublished) 1933 work *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* (*The Third Walpurgis Night*), a putative sequel to the romantic and classical Walpurgis Night scenes in *Parts One* and *Two* of Goethe's *Faust*. Edward Timms writes that '[from] the title through to the final words, *Dritte Walpurgisnacht* is permeated by a sense that the "most German of events" (das deutscheste Ereignis) is prefigured in Faust, the "most German of poems" (deutschesten Gedicht)'.¹²⁹ Timms observes that Kraus compares Hitler's 'feigned friendliness towards Hindenburg' to Mephistopheles's 'ravenous intimacy' (Rabentraulichkeit) and suggests that the violent events of *Faust Part Two* prefigure Hitler's seizure of power and the crimes of his stormtroopers. On an ideological level, 'Kraus's repeated emphasis on the concept of "Faustnaturen" identifies the vitalism portrayed in the play as one of the ideological antecedents of fascism'.¹³⁰ His recapitulation of the Faust theme against its Nazi appropriation is combined with a documentary montage technique that quotes the Nazis against themselves. Kraus's text is built out of 'over a thousand excerpts from the political discourse of 1933, interwoven with more than two hundred literary allusions'.¹³¹ The main objective of Kraus's satire and his use of Goethe is to expose the rhetoric of National Socialism, its 'tricks' or 'snares' of intonation and the 'Mephistophelian ingenuity' by which "sense" is turned into "nonsense" and back again'.¹³²

The rhetoric of fascism in Europe held appeal for politicians of both main parties in Ireland. As mentioned in chapter one, the best-known example of this is the Blueshirt movement. Following Fianna Fáil's election in 1932, the Army Comrades Association form the Blueshirts who, under the leadership of former police commissioner Eoin O'Duffy and the tutelage of Ernest Blythe, who is managing director of the Abbey Theatre during the production of *Faustus Kelly*, adopt the corporatism of Benito Mussolini and, according to Kieran Allen, had 'all the

¹²⁹ Karl Kraus, 'Warum Die Fackel nicht Erscheint', *Die Fackel*, 890–905 (July 1934), p. 81, cited and trans. in Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 503.

¹³⁰ Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 504.

¹³¹ Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 496.

¹³² Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 500, alluding to *Faust*, I. 1976.

trappings of a fascist outfit'.¹³³ The Blueshirts are banned after an abortive plan to march on the Dáil in August 1933, imitating Mussolini's Blackshirts and their march on Rome in 1922.¹³⁴ In a PhD thesis, Mark Phelan documents how earlier, in the 1920s, the Fianna Fáil party itself borrows heavily from Italian fascist propaganda to shape its populist messages about government frugality, rural development and a crackdown on profiteering (although criticizing the political system of dictatorship and Italian foreign policy). In 1929 de Valera causes outrage when he suggests that 'Fianna Fáil could be for Ireland what Fascismo was for Italy'.¹³⁵

In 1942–43 the fascist strain in Irish politics occupies its fringes, represented by two radical Irish language revival groups: Ailtirí na hAiséirghe (Architects of the Resurrection) and Glún na Buaidhe (The Victorious Generation). As Taaffe notes, O'Nolan's brother Ciarán is involved in Ailtirí na hAiséirghe's predecessor organisation and Gaelic League breakaway, Craobh na hAiséirí (Branch of the Resurrection).¹³⁶ The mawkishly conservative cultural politics and anti-Semitism of these extreme nationalist groups agitates O'Nolan throughout the 1940s and he writes a grimly satirical play in Irish, *An Scian* (*The Knife*) which lampoons the rivalry between the two groups (*PT*, pp. 247–58). Taaffe cites a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column he publishes on 15 March 1943 which compares their policies to European anti-Semitism. Myles reports listening to a street agitator from one of these small groups:

'Glún na Buaidhe', he roared, 'has its own ideas about the banks [...] has its own ideas about dancing. There is one sort of dancing that Glún na Buaidhe will not permit and that is jazz dancing. Because jazz dancing is the product of the dirty low nigger culture of America'.

Substitute jew for nigger there and you have something beautiful and modern.¹³⁷

¹³³ Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p. 52.

¹³⁴ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p. 52.

¹³⁵ Mark Phelan, 'Irish responses to Fascist Italy, 1919–1932' (PhD thesis, NUI Galway, 2013), <<http://hdl.handle.net/10379/3401>>, pp. 119–26. De Valera's remarks are cited on p. 223, referring to their original publication in *Anglo-Celt*, 21 Sept. 1929, as cited in Brian Reynolds, 'The Formation and Development of Fianna Fáil, 1926–32' (PhD thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1976), p. 177.

¹³⁶ Taaffe, p. 115.

¹³⁷ Taaffe, p. 155, citing *CL*, 15 March 1943, p. 3.

O’Nolan’s proximity to people holding these views in both his personal and professional life is indicated by the fact that Ernest Blythe himself is also a key supporter of Ailtirí na hAiséirghe, helping to draft its constitution.¹³⁸ In 1947 Niall Montgomery comments on O’Nolan’s unpublished polemical essay about the language revival, known by one of its chapter titles as ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, to suggest a comparison between National Socialism and the ‘Irish reaction’:

I imagine there may be an analogy, though possibly a slender one, between the Irish reaction + the violence of German National Socialism (compare Nuremberg with the velocipedantic Mór-Shubhails, Jew-baiting with the wonderful notion of higher-ranked Irish officials standing at the elbows of the old English ones, the hatred for Kultur-Bolshevismus + Neue Sachlichkeit (Jewish, international, foreign) with our cultural xenophobias, the Hitlerjugend stuff, glorification of the body, etc. with the amazing T. T., virginal, cycling, open-air, kilted & non-smoking characters in Rutland Square.)¹³⁹

This remark – including Montgomery’s positioning of bicycling as an Irish parallel for German fascist cultural pastimes – offers rich possibilities for a revised understanding of the significance of an anti-fascist critique across much of the work of O’Nolan and his collaborators.¹⁴⁰ This chapter shall now use the foregoing evidence to inform an analysis of Kelly which specifically focuses on the similarities between his rhetoric and the language used by Fianna Fáil in 1926–32, as well as its echoes with the Ailtirí na hAiséirghe and Glún na Buaidhe groups. This analysis suggests that Kelly is somewhat of a composite figure, designed to encompass everything O’Nolan disliked in Irish politics and, as such, demonstrates his use of a satirical strategy which resembles both the montage of quotations in Kraus’s *The Third Walpurgis Night* and a distanced approach to characterization resembling Shaw

¹³⁸ R. M. Douglas, ‘Ailtirí na hAiséirghe: Ireland’s fascist New Order’, *History Ireland*, 17.5 (September–October 2009), 40–44 (p. 44).

¹³⁹ Brian O’Nolan, ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’ annotated and corrected carbon copy, undated’, BC, 2/43, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ Eamonn Hughes offers one such reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in his essay, ‘Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in Edwina Keown, and Carol Taaffe (eds), *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, pp. 111–28.

or Brecht's use of everyman figures like Don Juan or Galy Gay. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these everyman characters permit, in Benjamin's words, a 'bodying forth of the contradictions which make up our society'.¹⁴¹

Paralleling the Brechtian strategy of using interrupted situations rather than dramatic set pieces, Kelly's political speeches in the play are never delivered at a rally or in public but always produced extempore and in private settings. As such, O'Nolan emphasizes the unstable nature of Kelly's rhetoric, its non-directional locutionary status and wandering referential coordinates:

KELLY: (*Quietly.*) Margaret, are you not being a little unfair? It is perhaps true that in politics there is much that is unpleasant. But speaking for myself (*his voice rises as he unconsciously climbs into his plane of ranting*) speaking for myself, this much I will say. As an accredited deputy in the national parliament I am determined to serve my country according to my lights and to the utmost of the talents which God has given me. I am determined to strike blow after blow against the vested interest. I am determined to break – to smash – backstairs jobbery in high places. I am determined to expose – to drag into the inexorable light of day – every knave, time-server, sycophant and party camp-follower. I will meet them all and fight them. I will declare war on the Masons and the Knights. I will challenge the cheat and the money-changer. (*PT*, 97-98)

The fact that Kelly is a Catholic nationalist and political centrist ('Neither Right nor Left will save us but the middle of the road' – *PT*, p. 66), draws him closest to the politics of Fianna Fáil. The position supports Cronin's view, founded on his reading of 'The Fausticity of Kelly', that O'Nolan is drawing upon the speeches he had no choice but to endure in Leinster House and all the 'agonies entailed' (*MBM*, p. 20) when serving as private secretary to government ministers like Seán MacEntee.¹⁴² However, a comparison of Dáil and Seanad transcripts from the period with Kelly's speeches suggests that it is not the rhetoric of Fianna Fáil deputations in the early 1940s which he has in his sights. In the 1940s ministers such as MacEntee or Seán

¹⁴¹ Benjamin, 'What Is the Epic Theater', trans. by Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings*, IV, p. 303.

¹⁴² Cronin records that on 18 August 1941 O'Nolan became private secretary to Seán MacEntee in the Ministry of Local Government (p. 120).

Lemass are defending Fianna Fáil's record as a party of government on matters like shortages and unemployment assistance, rather than launching populist attacks on their opponents.¹⁴³

Instead, Kelly uses the sort of rhetoric these same figures adopt during their earlier period in opposition mixed with the contemporary rhetoric of more radical far-right groups. O'Nolan expresses his critical view of the rising Fianna Fáil party and its main personalities in his 1955 account of the time that he ran and lost against de Valera's son, Vivion, for the auditorship of the Literary & Historical society at UCD during its 1932–1933 session. O'Nolan partially attributes the defeat to his recalcitrance in the face of the rise of triumphant Fianna Fáil ideology amongst the student body: 'The Fianna Fáil Party was by then firmly established, heaven on earth was at hand, and [Vivion] de Valera gained from this situation. I believed and said publicly that these politicians were unsuitable' (*MBM*, p. 20).

Kieran Allen, in his history of Fianna Fáil and the Irish labour movement, identifies four themes of its programme in what he calls the 'Radical Years' from 1926–32, which enabled it to expand its constituency to encompass workers and nationalist intellectuals. They are:

1. '*The Banks and Financial Plunder*';
2. '*A Free Ireland means Cheap Government*';
3. '*Catholic Social Justice*'; and
4. '*The Appeal to Workers*'.¹⁴⁴

All four themes are also found in Kelly's rhetoric and speeches. Reflecting Fianna Fáil's early focus on the banks as stooges of imperialism and their accusations of a corrupt Cumann na nGaedheal tie-up with British financiers, Kelly makes continuous insinuations of corruption, 'backstairs jobbery' and hidden scandals in high places. He plans to 'say a few words about the banks' at his upcoming rallies in the second act (*PT*, 65). Whilst Fianna Fáil itself comes to be known for clientelism, prior to de

¹⁴³ See for example, 'Private Deputies' Business. - Annulment of Unemployment Assistance (Employment Period) Order-Motion', 20 March 1941

<<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/takes/dail1941032000013#N123>> [accessed 26 February 2018].

¹⁴⁴ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp. 21–24.

Valera's arrival in government it is Fianna Fáil figures such as MacEntee who make these attacks. Allen quotes from a 1928 election leaflet in which MacEntee suggests that:

The banks, which have been bleeding the Irish farmer, crushing Irish industry, investing Irish money abroad, jeopardising it in British securities, want to retain the present government in office for their purposes ... A Fianna Fáil government would not be tied up with the old Unionist Party and the banks.¹⁴⁵

The second, related theme is the demand for cheap government. Cumman na nGaedheal were accused of trying to run Ireland on 'a grand imperial scale',¹⁴⁶ and Kelly restates the cheap government demand in his speeches:

Public departments must be ruthlessly pruned. Give me a free hand and I will save you a cool hundred thousand pounds in every one of them. I warrant you that if the people of this country see fit to send me to the Dail, there will be scandals in high places. (*PT*, p. 66)

The theme of efficiency and outrage at the extravagance of the existing regime also links Kelly to tactics Fianna Fáil shares with Italian fascism. In 1927 elections Fianna Fáil 'made "thrif" a core principle of party propaganda', leaning on the example of Mussolini's frugal Italy as a 'comparable regime'.¹⁴⁷ The theme of the spoils of government enters Goethe's *Faust Part Two* in Act Four. Faust and Mephistopheles help an emperor to put down a rebellion and the emperor gives his supporters the right to levy taxes on the territories of those who rebelled against him, declaring that 'yours be without stint / Royalties from safe-conduct, mining, salt, and mint' (l. - 10948). Faust wins the right to the coastline of this conquered territory and, in his old age, seeks to reclaim land from the sea to 'open room to live for millions / Not safely, but in free resilience' (l. 11563–11564). Yet these claims are also ambiguous:

¹⁴⁵ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p. 22, citing Fianna Fáil, *North Dublin Election Leaflet 1928*, O'Brien Collection, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁴⁶ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁷ Mark Phelan, 'Irish responses to Fascist Italy, 1919–1932', p. 205.

their realization is made doubtful by Faust's infirmity and blindness, then sullied by Mephistopheles's murder of the elderly couple Philemon and Baucis on his behalf. Kelly's indistinct vision of an Ireland freed from the yoke of an unjust government, as well as mirroring the real rhetoric of Fianna Fáil, also burlesques the Faustian vision of a land free for striving utilized by Nazi critics and commentators.

The third shared theme is Catholic social justice. Allen argues that Fianna Fáil 'believed that the fusion of Catholicism and Irish nationalism could produce a unique society constructed around social justice', thus 'rejecting any imputation of communism in Fianna Fáil'. An anti-communist stance is particularly important in the face of a red scare ahead of the 1932 election in which de Valera was accused by the *United Irishman* of leading the country into 'Bolshevik servitude'.¹⁴⁸ Represented by figures such as Aodh de Blácam and James Devane, Catholic social conscience rejects both the excesses of Anglo-American capitalism and the evils of Soviet Communism as the twin results of 'materialist' values, in contradistinction to the spiritual and idealist values of the Irish nation.¹⁴⁹ This is a significant ideological thread in Kelly's rhetoric. He peppers his speeches with references to Ireland's history as a Catholic nation that has come under foreign sway, lauding 'Niall of the Nine Hostages, who penetrated to the Alps in his efforts to spread the gospel' (*PT*, p. 71), lamenting the effect of 'seven centuries of alien domination and godless misrule' (*PT*, p. 91) and claiming that he has chosen 'to make a few Christian principles the basis of my scheme of life' (*PT*, p. 115). When forced to quickly fabricate the demonic Stranger's background, Kelly says that he is a 'graduate of the National University which was founded by Cardinal Newman to enable the cream of our Catholic youth to partake of the benefits of University education' (*PT*, p. 52).

Catholic social principles were taken to an extreme by the puritanical visions of Craobh na hAiseirghe / Ailtirí na hAiséirghe propaganda, which promotes the idea that a revived Ireland, drawing on the glories of its past culture, could match and even supersede the achievements and architecture of the Third Reich. As Taaffe notes, on 21 November 1942, *Cruiskeen Lawn* comments on the plausibility of plans set out by Craobh na hAiseirghe to replace an impure Dublin with a new capital city

¹⁴⁸ Phelan, 'Irish responses to Fascist Italy, 1919-1932', pp. 23, 52.

¹⁴⁹ Such as Aodh de Blácam, 'What do We Owe the Abbey?', *Irish Monthly*, 63 (1935), 191-200; pp. 199-200, and James Devane, 'Is an Irish Culture Possible?', *Ireland To-day*, 1.5 (October 1936), 21-31 (p. 23). See Taaffe, p. 46 for a discussion of the Catholic Social critics.

at the ancient site of Tara, including ‘a new national university, theatre and stadium; a massive “Great National Avenue”; and a “Garden of Heroes” with a Millennium-spire like “Column of the Resurrection” as its centrepiece’.¹⁵⁰ The new Tara is presented by Myles as the master cliché of ‘revivalist absurdity’: ‘Cement appears out of what cerulean ether? A blue sky. And as if by what? Magic, of course’.¹⁵¹

O’Nolan connects Kelly to these groups by having him parrot the same clichés and the same anti-Masonry rhetoric used by the right-wing nationalists of many stripes when he declares that he ‘won’t be stopped by Knight or Mason’ (*PT*, p. 67). In Ireland Masonic institutions and lodges, such as the Grand Council of Knight Masons convoked in 1923, play a role in both republican and unionist politics, but the Catholic Church was and remains hostile to Masonry: joining any Masonic group has been prohibited since Clement XII’s *In Eminenti* Papal Bull issued on 28 April 1738.¹⁵² However, Catholic Ireland had its own secretive religious society in the form of the Knights of St. Columbanus, to which the leaders of the Irish Labour Party between 1930 and 1967 belonged and to which Kelly may also be referring.¹⁵³

In his thesis on Irish responses to fascist Italy, Phelan finds that the anti-Masonry of Mussolini’s Italy ‘captured the imagination of [Irish] commentators with a keen nose for conspiracy closer to home. Identified with defeated unionist and surviving imperialist sentiment, Irish Freemasonry quickly became a target of abuse’.¹⁵⁴ Fianna Fáil blames Masonry for the cost of government, trading off the perception of the post-imperial administration as ‘a Mason-dominated “old boy’s club”’.¹⁵⁵ Anti-Masonry sentiments at this time are firmly associated with fascist organisations across Europe. Notably, Masonry constitutes part of the tussle over Goethe’s legacy between left and right when Goethe himself comes under attack for his membership with the Weimar Freemason Lodge in Else Rost’s *Goethe’s Faust: Eine Freimaurertragödie* [*Faust: A Masonic Tragedy*] (1931), which is brought out by First

¹⁵⁰ Description of plans in Douglas, p. 42.

¹⁵¹ Taaffe, p. 115 and *CL*, 21 November 1942, p. 3.

¹⁵² Charles H. Lyttle, ‘Historical Bases of Rome’s Conflict with Freemasonry’, *Church History*, 9.1 (1940), 3–23 (p. 3).

¹⁵³ Ronan Fanning, ‘The age of our craven deference is finally over’, *Independent*, 6 December 2009 <<https://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/the-age-of-our-craven-deference-is-finally-over-26588891.html>> [accessed 24 February 2020].

¹⁵⁴ Phelan, ‘Irish responses to Fascist Italy, 1919–1932’, p. 206.

¹⁵⁵ Phelan, ‘Irish responses to Fascist Italy, 1919–1932’, p. 205.

World War General and Nazi-supporter Eric Ludendorff's publishing house. The pamphlet claims that 'Goethe's *Faust*, supposedly Germany's greatest dramatic work, was in fact a barely disguised hymn to the Freemasons' ongoing project of delivering the world over to Jewish control'.¹⁵⁶ Kelly's emphatic invectives against Masonry in the context of his becoming a Faustian politician subtly draws attention to this fault-line in the fascist appropriation of Goethe's *Faust*.

The fourth theme identified by Allen is 'a distinct appeal to organised workers'. Fianna Fáil argues that workers 'suffered most from foreign domination because exploitation and poverty were worse when foreign masters were in control', and therefore subordinate the trade union struggle to nationalist goals.¹⁵⁷ Kelly does not appeal to organised workers, although his election poster, 'NOT FOR PARTY NOR PRIVILEGE BUT FOR COUNTRY AND PEOPLE – KELLY' clearly pitches his campaign as a populist appeal to the masses rather than the privileged (*PT*, p. 59). When confronted with Captain Shaw's '*exaggerated haw-haw English accent*' (*PT*, p. 68), Kelly responds with a jeremiad against 'wicked men who live in gilded palaces in England cradled in luxury and licentious extravagance, knowing nothing and caring nothing for either the English masses, the historic and indefeasible Irish nation, the naked Negro in distant and distressed India or the New Zealand pygmy on his native shore' (*PT*, p. 72). Echoing the rhetoric of the 'Cyclops' episode in *Ulysses* and a common sentiment among right-wing nationalists, Kelly couches his attack on the wealthy in anti-imperialist terms but also privileges the Irish over the non-white colonial subject, whom he denigrates by describing as 'naked' and 'distressed'.

Whilst O'Nolan's role in the civil service made it problematic for him to openly attack the ministers for whom he worked, by having Kelly mirror the rabble-rousing rhetoric of these same figures before they had got into power and then associating Kelly with fringe-groupings more contemporary to the 1940s, he is able to attack the irresponsibility of his political masters under the cover of plausible deniability. This carefully constructed cover intrudes into every detail of the play. When the Stranger is refused a ministerial sanction, the minister in question could feasibly correspond to Seán MacEntee who, as Minister for Local Government and Public Health from 1941–1947, O'Nolan served as a Private Secretary at this point

¹⁵⁶ Kirst-Gundersen and Levesque, 'Faust im Braunhemd', p. 157.

¹⁵⁷ Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p. 24.

(*L*, p. xxxiv). This role in defeating the devil neatly heads off any scandalous imputations that might follow from the identification of Kelly and his politics with Fianna Fáil politicians. O’Nolan suggests in a letter to John Garvin of 8 September 1952 that the then Minister for Finance, Séan T. O’Kelly, even assisted him with ‘suggestions and revisions, in an Abbey play I wrote concerned with the problem of the “unsanctioned man”’ (*L*, p. 165). However, in subsequent accounts of the play O’Nolan seeks to reverse this masking of the play’s political satire and draw out its full implications. As also mentioned above, on 3 April 1954 he described it in *Cruiskeen Lawn* as ‘a masterpiece, saturated with a Voltaire quality and penetrating human stupidity with a sort of ghoulish gusto’. When he comes to accounting for why so many people disliked it at the time and why ‘did we all, including myself, think it so bad’, Myles suggests that ‘the play (though straight farce) had hurt too many people, and that sort of thing doesn’t pay in this country’ (*CL*, 3 April 1954, p. 10).

Faustus Kelly depicts its hero as a miniature fascist dictator in-waiting, a parodic Hitler or Mussolini planted into the shoes of a grasping provincial politician. Kelly is a hypocritical petit-bourgeois figure, opportunistically relying on religious rhetoric and populist clichés drawn from the worst of the past two decades of Irish politics, which are delivered with a frothy, undisciplined charisma arising only from his own inexhaustible self-righteousness. Kelly is best understood in his own words as ‘speaking for myself (*his voice rises as he unconsciously climbs into his plane of ranting*) speaking for myself’ (*PT*, p. 97). As such, he is a figure designed to concentrate in one person the corruption, prejudice and irresponsibility of Irish politics across all parties and link that irresponsibility uncomfortably to the wider fascist turn in European politics. The satirical message of bringing Kelly so low at the end of the play – unravelling his electoral victory and having even the devil abandon him in disgust – may be viewed as an anti-fascist gesture. Kelly’s absurd redemption by default can be read as the equivalent of Kraus’s defiant statement after breaking his silence on the victory of the Nazis, and the opening line of *The Third Walpurgis Night*: ‘Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein’ (Hitler brings nothing to my mind).¹⁵⁸

What does this mean for the ‘Fausticity of Kelly’? In the context of the right-wing appropriations of the Faustian theme in the early twentieth century, from Oswald Spengler’s ‘Faustian Age’ in *The Decline of the West*, vol. 2 (1922) to the

¹⁵⁸ Karl Kraus, ‘Warum die Fackel nicht erscheint’, p. 2. My translation.

avowedly National Socialist appropriations of Faust discussed in this chapter, O’Nolan’s failed Faust, who achieves his redemption only through a combination of incompetence and subordination to an existing bureaucratic system, becomes a scathing rebuke to the notion of ‘Faustnature’ along the lines of Kraus’s *The Third Walpurgis Night*. This interpretation aligns with the way that verse by Goethe (or lines pretending to be) is presented in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, wherein hybridizing montage techniques are deployed to remind readers that there is no unifying national essence to be distilled from the works of either Ireland or Germany’s literary figures.

Yet O’Nolan’s play is also evasive and unwilling to confront these opponents directly. Through the figure of Kelly himself, *Faustus Kelly* masks its anti-fascist gestures so convincingly that they passed under the radar of one of its own targets, Ernest Blythe, who had recently engaged closely with the Irish far-right. In his letter commending the play to Blythe on 12 June 1942, O’Nolan cautiously suggested that ‘there are certain political implications to it which, as a *stát-sheribhíseach*, I’m not too sure about, but possibly that could be got over’ (L, p. 118). Likewise, the play’s plot construction is contrived to evade charges of a frontal attack on the existing government, avoiding any negative repercussions for O’Nolan’s career as a civil servant. In this light, O’Nolan’s emphasis on the play’s satirical significance in his column of 1954 and again in his article of 1963, is revealing. Once out of the Civil Service, he wishes to stake a claim for a critique that was perhaps too well hidden in the first place. In this sense, *Faustus Kelly* is a work which embodies the labyrinth that Hedges recognizes as one of the Faust myth’s two dominant interpretative frameworks. Like Goethe’s *Faust* itself, the text is entangled by its conflicting drives.

5.8. Politics and laughter in *The Insect Play*

In her critique of the Myles plays, Long suggests that perhaps it is simply a matter of degree by which their comic purpose can cause them to accidentally lapse into the very stereotypes they are supposed to deconstruct: a ‘dependency on cliché, rather than its attenuation’.¹⁵⁹ To explore the use of cliché in a different way, it is possible to take as a point of departure the use of accent and typecast characters in other experimental European dramatists such as Brecht, Kraus and the Čapek brothers. These dramatists combine theatrical techniques that generate distance with comedy

¹⁵⁹ Long, ‘Brian O’Nolan and the Irish stereotype’, p. 35.

that keeps our attention and therefore acts as a substitute for emotional identification between the audience and the characters. The deployment of vaudeville-style humour, tapping into the stereotypes and blank ironies of popular culture, also enables their work to occupy the middle position of ‘de-aestheticized autonomous art’ which the introduction to this thesis proposed as the most satisfactory categorization of the avant-garde position in relation to artistic autonomy.¹⁶⁰ As chapter one concluded in relation to *Blather* and Dada, O’Nolan’s work occupies this middle position, gathering comic momentum and even shreds of commercial viability from mass culture whilst preserving a vantage-point from which to criticize society.

This perspective will now inform this chapter’s discussion of *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play*, in which it is compared to two examples of Central European modernist theatre: its source text, *Ze života hmyzu* (*From the Insects’ Life*), by Karel and Josef Čapek; and Karl Kraus’s anti-war epic, *The Last Days of Mankind*. The chapter supports the suggestion by L. Kieran that *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* teaches its audience what happens ‘when the part has convinced itself that it is the whole and in egomaniacal obsession sets itself out to dominate and destroy all who differ from it’ and is therefore an attempt at doing ‘a national service’.¹⁶¹ Through devices that parallel those of epic theatre, O’Nolan’s play delivers a number of politically-charged interventions: it is highly transgressive in its portrayal of homosexual desire in the first act and the use of Catholic Boy Scouts as a chorus in this context; like the Čapeks’ original, it is extremely critical of the acquisitive and aspirational middle class; and finally it is devastating in the depiction of chauvinism on both sides of the Irish conflict in its final act, deploying typecast characters to draw unmistakable comparisons between what O’Nolan sees essentialist preoccupations with national identity in Ireland and the continental fascism that the Čapeks fought against.

Act One is the most substantially reinvented act compared to the original. This section of the original Čapeks’ play satirizes upper class flappers of the 1920s by presenting them as butterflies who write poetry, chase each other around and muse nihilistically on sex, aesthetics and reproduction. O’Nolan substantially transforms the original by converting the effete, heterosexual 1920s characters of the Čapeks’ version into bees who resemble camp thespians with, as Robert Tracy puts it, ‘Trinity

¹⁶⁰ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 32, citing Wolin, ‘Modernism vs. Postmodernism’, p. 16.

¹⁶¹ Letter by L. Kieran, *Irish Press*, 25 March 1943, p. 3.

accents'.¹⁶² The association with the theatre is made clear by the replacement of poems that the Čapeks' butterflies write themselves with a 'drone' who drawls out long passages from Shakespeare, which according to Kieran complement the action 'most appositely'.¹⁶³ Instead of a dialogue in which sex and death are closely associated through the cynical aestheticism and upper-class decadence of the Čapeks' butterflies, O'Nolan has his bees ruminate on the two essential facts of their existence: their adoration of a distant Queen with whom almost none of them will ever mate; and their possession of a sting which will kill them when they use it, although the experience will be sensuously glorious. The act goes to great lengths to sexualize the abdominal thrust of stinging: effectively presenting the characters as facing an existential choice between a long, unpleasant life of heterosexual self-denial and immediate, homosexual fulfilment:

CECIL: Well, I daon't know. I do think life is very baffling. I mean, what is one to do. Sting, or live on in the hope of meeting the Queen?

CYRIL: Yes, old boy, that's the difficulty, the choice between the sensuous delight of stinging with the rather charming death that follows, or keeping oneself ... you knaow ... chaste and alive in the hope of meeting the Queen. It is very difficult, Cec-eel. Very, very difficult.

CECIL: I do think I'll sting some man person, Cyr-eel.

CYRIL: Do wait a little longer, old boy. Control of the passions and all that. One mustn't give in to every impulse. (*PT*, pp. 173–73)

In a gesture comparable to the lightly concealed queerness of O'Nolan's short story 'John Duffy's Brother' (1940), *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* uses the cover of its status as a translation to present homosexual desire which is not present in the original quite openly.¹⁶⁴ The English accents of Cyril and Cecil, their barely concealed homosexuality and their parodically thespian diction makes them a parody of a particular community: that of the play's producers, Hilton Edwards and Michael Mac Liammóir (who was born in London, named Alfred Willmore), English men who had emigrated to Dublin and, in the case of Mac Liammóir, substantially Gaelicized

¹⁶² Tracy, p. 10.

¹⁶³ Letter by L. Kieran, *Irish Press*, 25 March 1943, p. 3.

¹⁶⁴ 'John Duffy's Brother', *Irish Digest* (June 1940), 69–73, reprinted in *SF*, pp. 54–58.

his identity as part of his absorption into his new home.¹⁶⁵ Here Myles also occupies a similar comic territory to the beginning of the second part of Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* where the speaker enters the literary salon of Lady Trimmer, a representative of the 'old regime' which is attended by the interchangeable intellectuals O'Rooney, O'Cooney and O'Mooney.¹⁶⁶ However, O'Nolan's reimagined situation also entwines homosexual desire with inevitable death, aping a Wildean motif: the love that dare not speak its name is fatal for a Trinity College bee.

O'Nolan's interaction with the 'small gay subculture' which coalesced around the Edwards-Mac Liammóir partnership and the White Stag group of artists known as the 'Subjectivist' movement, noted for 'their homosexuality, and their psychology problems', is touched on by some critics.¹⁶⁷ Clair Wills, for example, suggests that O'Nolan is hostile towards this community:

This crowd was ripe for ridicule by Flann O'Brien in his relentlessly satirical portraits of the 'immigrant flyboys' dressed in corduroy and stinking of oil-paint, liable at any moment to bore you with stories of Braque or the 'Rue des Grues-Nues', if not discourses on Kafka and existentialism.¹⁶⁸

Doubtless, effete artists and dramatists, with their English accents and studious Celtophilia, are subject to plenty of abuse in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. For example, as discussed in chapter six, Myles responds to the White Stag's 1944 'Exhibition of Subjective Art' with a mock lengthy exhibition opening speech of his own. However, the queered presentation of the Čapeks' butterflies as male bees in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, which is produced as part of a large-scale show involving 150 actors in close collaboration with the Edwards-Mac Liammóir production team, surely represents something more than an outsider lampooning a culture of which he knew little. The way that *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* is attacked by Gabriel Fallon in the

¹⁶⁵ Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Double Biography of Michael MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), pp. 38–51.

¹⁶⁶ Johnston, *Dramatic Works*, p. 53.

¹⁶⁷ Róisín Kennedy, 'Experimentalism or Mere Chaos? The White Stag Group and the Reception of Subjective Art in Ireland' in *Irish Modernisms: Origins, Contexts, Publics* (Bern and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 174–194 (p. 182). See also Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys: the citizen and the artist', pp. 112–126.

¹⁶⁸ Wills, p. 287.

Catholic Standard, for example, suggests that the presentation of camp, sexualized characters in a play which also makes use of dozens of Catholic Boy Scouts for its crowd scenes is a transgressive act, calculated to provoke the conservative side of Ireland's cultural debates and extremely successful in this respect. Appropriately for a play in which the second act centres on dung beetles, moral outrage at the various offences of O'Nolan's adaptation is couched in excremental terms. Tracy cites an exchange of letters between O'Nolan and Fallon in which O'Nolan as 'the translator' suggests, extraordinarily, that Fallon actually took steps to 'sabotage' the play by convincing the Director of the Boy Scouts that their involvement was immoral:

Last week you were good enough to publish an article by Gabriel Fallon in which it was suggested that myself and about 150 other people were engaged in presenting obscenities and salacities on the Dublin stage [...] After sending you his disquisition on dung, Mr. Fallon communicated with the Director of the Boy Scouts employed in the play and used every endeavour to make him withdraw the boys so that the whole presentation would be sabotaged; he did not succeed, and presumably an opportunity will be found later for associating the Boy Scout organization with dung, which is Mr. Fallon's symbol of disapproval.¹⁶⁹

The presentation of a barely veiled homosexual community in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* is certainly seen by the Catholic critics more as an expression of solidarity with this form of social deviance than a condemnation of it. Furthermore, by featuring homosexual thespian characters in a play produced by Dublin's most famous male theatrical partnership, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* takes on a self-reflexive aspect. It becomes a performance by actors playing a part that involves self-parody and hence – like the constant self-parody of *Cruiskeen Lawn* discussed in chapter six – generates both humour and critical distance on the part of audience and actor.

The distance is underpinned by another element Myles adds to Act One: the drowsy and then somnambulant quotation of passages from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry VII*, *Henry V*, *Timon of Athens*, *Othello* by the 'Drone' (PT, pp. 168, 169, 175, 179, 180, 181, 182). The drone at first interrupts the action and then slowly subsumes it from his half-asleep position when, believing all the other male

¹⁶⁹ Tracy, p. 10.

bees have killed themselves, the queen approaches him as a potential mate. When the half-asleep drone continues to quote lines of Shakespeare at her, the queen kills herself in a rage by stinging the tramp. Basil returns to report her death to the drone who, with some fitting lines from *Macbeth*, finally falls asleep. The drone is an automaton who is only able to speak by interrupting the action with Shakespearian fragments that flicker between an arbitrary and apposite relation to the main action. The effect is hugely comical but it also requires the actors to engage with each other in the kind of strikingly different terms that are required by epic theatre, wherein the 'performed' is interspersed with the 'formulated'.¹⁷⁰

In Act Two, O'Nolan follows the Čapeks' lead to turn his lens on the middle of Irish society. He critiques the patter of the upwardly mobile, recently rural Irish citizen whose step up from peasantry to petit-bourgeois and, for a few, to politician, civil servant or crony-capitalist, characterizes the change in Catholic Ireland's social demographics throughout the period running from the post-famine years to the early 1940s. Tracy notes that O'Nolan harshens the critique of small businessmen and civil servants in his re-imagining of the Čapeks' version by 'more strongly emphasizing their greedy petty capitalism'.¹⁷¹ Unlike the original play's authors, as the Acting Assistant Principal Officer of the Planning Department, O'Nolan had plenty of experience of dealing with the demands the provincial petit-bourgeoisie which dominate *Faustus Kelly* and who are also represented by the beetles and crickets. Joseph Lee, in *The Modernisation of Irish Society: 1848–1918*, notes that the system of local government installed by the Local Government Act of 1898, whilst a step towards Irish control of Irish affairs, had the unfortunate side-effect of fostering clientelism on a systematic level in Irish local politics, such that it took the Free State years to clear out the resulting 'Augean stable of corruption'.¹⁷²

The depiction of capital as a ball of dung is in line with the Čapeks' version and, as Tracy identifies, corresponds to the way that the dung beetle is originally described in the play's source material, Jean Henri Fabre's numerous entomological studies collected in English translation as *The Life and Love of the Insect*, or alternatively titled *Social Life in the Insect World* (1911). Fabre has recourse to an analogy with the

¹⁷⁰ Brecht, 'Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*', p. 98.

¹⁷¹ Tracy, p. 10.

¹⁷² Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society: 1848-1918* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2008), Kindle edition, loc. 1900.

language of the ‘workyard’ and class war when explaining how dung beetles, whilst appearing to collaborate, are in fact willing to rob each other at the first opportunity:

Once his ball is ready, a dung-beetle issues from the crowd and leaves the work-yard, pushing his spoil behind him. A neighbour, one of the newcomers, whose own task is hardly begun, suddenly drops his work and runs to the ball now rolling, to lend a hand to the lucky owner, who seems to accept the proffered aid kindly. Henceforth, the two cronies work as partners. Each does his best to push the pellet to a place of safety. Was a compact really concluded in the workyard, a tacit agreement to share the cake between them? ... The eager fellow-worker, under the deceitful pretence of lending a helpful hand, nurses the scheme of purloining the ball at the first opportunity ... I ask myself in vain what Proudhon introduced into Beetle-morality the daring paradox that ‘property is based on plunder’, or what diplomatist taught Dung-beetles the savage maxim that ‘might is right’.¹⁷³

O’Nolan, who embraces the slapstick portrayal of capital as a stinking ‘ball of dirt’ which the original offers him (*PT*, p. 186), may be seen as bearing the same ambivalent relationship to Marxism as continental satirists like Kraus or the Čapeks.¹⁷⁴ He is sympathetic to anti-capitalist sentiments and appears to be familiar enough with the ideas of Marx, yet seems to be sceptical of the idea of workers’ revolution and critical of collectivist projects in general.¹⁷⁵ The left doesn’t escape

¹⁷³ Fabre, Jean-Henry, *The Life and Love of the Insect*, trans. by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (London: A and C. Black, 1911), pp. 8–11. Cited in Tracy, p. 8.

¹⁷⁴ Selver translates it as ‘*A large ball of manure*’ in Karel and Josef Čapek, *The Life of the Insects*, trans. by Paul Selver, in *International Modern Plays* (London: J. M Dent & Sons, 1950), p. 113. The play is translated into English by Selver in 1923 and performed in New York and London, within a year of its premier in the Czech original in Brno and in the same year it is published in Czech (p. x).

¹⁷⁵ There are numerous references to Marx and Marxism in O’Nolan’s contributions to the *Irish Times* (such as short references in a letter by Flann O’Brien, 11 August 1938 and *CL*, 10 November 1941, and the longer passage in 25 April 1947 on ‘Echo-gnomics, a fairly new science, by the way, which arose from the perusal by a German Jew named Mordecai (alias Karl Marx) of Smith’s “Wealth of Nations.” This science, originally preoccupied with the organisation of poverty on an international basis, is now generally understood to mean that corpus of delusions and lies which attributes scarcities and want to natural causes (mostly mineral and meteorological) rather than to the crimes of political demagogues.’

harsh satire in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* when O'Nolan echoes the original text by portraying the 'Parasite', introduced as '*a frightful-looking sight and the last word in mealy-mouthed joxers*' (PT, p. 204). O'Nolan's version makes it more explicit that the Parasite identifies as communist ('I take me stand on communism, the boss class is goin' to let me starve to death') and also changes the original so that he behaves more obsequiously before the Duck ('No offence, yer royal highness. I sincerely beg yer pardin' – PT, pp. 208–207). In both versions, the communist Parasite has his ironic revenge on the upper class when he mirrors its predatory actions by eating the offspring of the Duck (in the Čapeks' version, the larva of the Ichneumon Fly), upon which O'Nolan's vagrant comments: 'You're a communist all right, there's no doubt about that. You dirty lookin' bags' (PT, p. 210). O'Nolan's unfavourable depiction of the hypocritical communist Parasite bears comparison to the encounter between the vagrant and a Marxist 'orator' in Beckett's novella, *The End* (1946), who uses the narrator as an example in his speech but abuses him as a 'leftover' and a 'crucified bastard'.¹⁷⁶ This concern about the violence justified by communist rhetoric is shared with Kraus. Despite the popularity of his missives against capitalism with the Social Democrats, he condemned the violence of Béla Kun's communist revolution in Hungary and Timms describes him as 'anti-bourgeois but not anti-capitalist'.¹⁷⁷

As discussed in relation to the politics of *Faustus Kelly*, a suspicion of communism twinned with a critical attitude to British laissez-faire economics and Empire Free Trade comprise a common ground between left and right which Fianna Fáil uses to lever itself into power. The distrust of British-style capitalism made itself felt in a distaste for careers in entrepreneurial commerce and business as a whole. Joseph Lee notes that the lack of respect afforded to business, as well as the superior salaries of professionals, swells Ireland's workforce disproportionately with clerks, doctors and lawyers in the early twentieth century.¹⁷⁸ By O'Nolan's generation, the civil service is added to the list of destinations preferable to a career in enterprise for the Catholic middle class. In Act Two the dung beetle and their undignified grasping after a 'ball of dirt' are initially contrasted with Mr and Mrs Cricket, who are the more

¹⁷⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The End* (1946) in *The Complete Short Prose: 1939–1989*, ed. Stanley Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 78–99 (p. 95). Translated from original French by Richard Seaver in collaboration with Beckett.

¹⁷⁷ Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 256.

¹⁷⁸ Lee, loc. 350. As

respectable couple because of Mr Cricket's position in the Civil Service (a distinction which O'Nolan's version adds to the original).¹⁷⁹ First, he allows his audience to have a good laugh at the 'appalling' Dublin accents of the dung beetles (*PT*, p. 186), having fun with the Čapeks' scatological psychology of capital accumulation. Then, bringing in Mr and Mrs Cricket with their Cork accents and aspirations for 'a nice job in the service' (which reflects O'Nolan's own family experience and also indulges the same stereotype of the self-interested Cork civil servant as he does with the Clerk in *Faustus Kelly*), O'Nolan turns his satirical lens on the more respectably professional status of those more likely to be in his Gate Theatre audience. However, as in the Čapeks' version, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* presents a parallel between the desire of the beetles for an ever-larger ball of dung and that of the Crickets for respectability and children. Then, Mrs Cricket's murder by the Ichneumon Fly in the Čapeks' version, and by the distinctly old regime Anglo-Irish Duck in O'Nolan, erases the distinction between them. The sudden pathos of this scene contrasts with the more pantomime-like portrayals of suicidal aesthetes in Act One:

MRS CRICKET: Well, do oo know, isn't that the cantankerous oul sow, I wouldn't blame her husband for skipping off with himself. (*She rattles and sings to herself tunelessly*). I feel queer. I feel very queer in meself.

(*Enter DUCK*)

DUCK: Ao, what have we here? Tally-ho, tally-ho!

(*He kills MRS. CRICKET and starts to drag her body up to the next with his leg.*)

TRAMP: Ay, luckit here, what are you doing? You've killed her!

DUCK: Oh-ho, chickabiddy! Chick chick chick! Wake up darling. Daddy's brought something nice.

TRAMP: Well begob can you beat that. He done her in front of me eyes and me sittin' here lookin' at him. And I didn't move a hand to save her. Begob I'm worse than he is. It's a bloody shame. (*PT*, p. 204)

The violence of this scene and its local colouring, perhaps raises uncomfortable questions about the prosperous status of Dublin's cultural life during the war in contrast to the slaughter taking place in Europe. The decision to stage the play at all is important in this respect. Karel Čapek died in 1938, having witnessed the German

¹⁷⁹ Tracy makes this observation, p. 10.

occupation of Czechoslovakia and the end of its national aspirations. His brother Josef died in the Belsen concentration camp in 1945.¹⁸⁰ O’Nolan’s portrayal of unbecoming violence with the murder of a pregnant woman angers the critics. Rightly, he can argue in response that it is a close translation of the original.¹⁸¹

In Act Three O’Nolan follows the Čapeks’ version closely. The tramp muses that there is an alternative to the horrors perpetrated in self-interest that he’s witnessed to be found in community and a common goal. This, he believes, is what separates humanity from the insect world: ‘We have what they call a plan. Every man with his own job, all workin’ away together for the good of all’ (*PT*, p. 211). Then he stumbles upon an ant colony and finds himself in the middle of a frenetic military-industrial complex which is gearing up for war. Soon enough, amidst fanatical nationalistic rhetoric, war is declared over the cause of a dead beetle (in the Čapeks’ version, it is the claim to a path between two blades of grass) and horrors ensue. At the end of the slaughter, there is just one tribe of ants and one leader left, who declares his dominion over the world only to be squashed by the tramp.

O’Nolan differentiates his version from that of the Čapeks by laying on incendiary amounts of local colour and characterization. The ants the tramp first encounters are Ulster loyalists with Belfast accents, ‘loyal’, ‘hord-headed’ and motivated ‘to show we don’t care a domn for thon Awnt over in Rome!’ who march ‘[in] stap with the Awnt Empiere [...] On which the sun never sats’ (*PT*, pp. 215, 217). They begin a war with ‘the dirty Green Awnts’ (*PT*, p. 221) over the ownership of a dead beetle and then, spurred by their own fanatical political and religious rhetoric and the dictatorial ambitions of their Chief Engineer, find themselves at war with the Red Ants (the British) over the same dead beetle. As battle erupts between ants of all colours, the brutality of war rendered in O’Nolan’s Belfast dialect is comical and disturbing in equal measure: ‘Tell them to take no prisoners. Slaughter avvery-body! Slaughter the annemy’s weemen ond wee awnts! A holy vactory!; ‘Attack! Take no prisoners! Forward avverybody to the front! Set all the annemy prisoners on fire and roast them! Tear up the wee prisoner awnts into wee bits!’ (*PT*, p. 234). The Ulster ants are defeated by a counter-attack by the Red ants, who in turn

¹⁸⁰ Peter Majer and Cathy Porter, ‘Chronology’ in *Čapek: Four Plays* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. viii.

¹⁸¹ The 2 April 1943 letter by O’Nolan in *The Standard* states that ‘the scene is Čapek verbatim’, which it is. Qtd. in Tracy, p. 15.

are defeated by the invading southern Irish Green Ants '*who wear enormous gold fáinnes*' (*PT*, p. 238). In a moment of violent fantasy-fulfilment for 32-county nationalists, a 'RICH VOICE' stands victorious over the heap of corpses and declares 'ní bheidh acht an Ghaeilge amháin á labhairt ar fúd an domhain feasta' (there will be nothing except Gaelic spoken across the earth from now on – *PT*, p. 238). However, having finally won control of Ireland and defeated the British, this Irish emperor is then squashed by the disgusted, Dublin-born tramp.

The use of stereotypical motifs or accents and the sequence of interruptions in this scene permit the audience a critical distance on the issues which are being raised in the terms of Brecht's epic theatre. The action is humorous but also uncomfortable: it is political in a way which many reviewers find objectionable. Holloway writes that 'it was a thing of sheer burlesque and in the ants scene the Irish were held up to ridicule in cruelly crude fashion'.¹⁸² As discussed, Hogan comments that whereas the Čapeks wrote a 'serious satire', O'Nolan uses the material 'to burlesque the divisions in this country to make a theatrical holiday'.¹⁸³ The satirical effect of assigning these national identities and accents to the ant tribes is a striking one. The industrial strength of Belfast is pilloried as the inhabitants of the Six Counties are made out to be religious fanatics motivated by their fear of being forced to speak Latin, 'a dad language', by the South. Their accidental war with the British Empire over a beetle is an example of imperial 'blowback' which presciently highlights the powder keg situation that the British state had created by fostering sectarian divisions in the north. More broadly, by resituating the slaughter and genocide taking place on the battlefields of Europe and East Asia in an Irish context, O'Nolan also draws out the implications of the racist underbelly of certain forms of nationalism in Ireland. His Protestant 'awnts' strongly suggest that, as Lee writes, '[racialism], articulated in religious idiom, dominated Ulster unionist hostility to home rule. That home rule meant Rome rule was, for the average Ulster Protestant, conclusive condemnation of any tampering with the union'.¹⁸⁴

The drawing of this equivalence between Irish politics and continental violence is one of the darker statements of O'Nolan's career as a satirist. Tracy writes that whereas 'the Čapeks left it to the director to decide whether the characters

¹⁸² Holloway, Manuscript Diaries, National Library of Ireland, MSS 2008, p. 520, cited in Tracy, p. 12.

¹⁸³ T.W. [Thomas Hogan], "The Insect Play" at the Gaiety', *Irish Press*, 23 March 1943, p. 3

¹⁸⁴ Lee, loc. 1937.

would be like people acting like insects, or insects acting like people, Myles is more decisive. He is bleaker, more pitiless. His humans are insects'.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, by involving the Free State in the play's genocidal conflict he appears to refuse the Irish a neutral standpoint: their ideological fetishes are just as much to blame for the world conflagration as those of Hitler, Stalin or Hirohito. The southern Irish backdrop to *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, however, is not as divorced from the conflict overseas as might be assumed in the years of the Emergency. Éire may not have participated in the war directly but every morning, within the constraints of official impartiality, its newspapers provide detailed coverage of the major campaigns. Wills suggests that:

Compared to foreign news media, Irish newspapers produced a strangely blank description of the conflict. Rather like contemporary TV images of 'precision bombing' and 'smart missiles', the dead and dying were curiously absent.¹⁸⁶

The effect of this form of coverage, she suggests, was that '[while] Irish people might follow the bare narrative of the war – might indeed become well versed in questions of military strategy, the ebb and flow of victories and defeats – they were not supposed to feel involved'.¹⁸⁷ However, if the coverage has the atrocities cut out, the newspapers compensate with an almost childish sense of excitement. On 6 January 1943, the *Evening Herald* runs the front page story 'Red Army Claims More Captures' which pulls together reports from German and Russian government sources to create a vivid present-tense account of the Soviet advance: 'Fast moving tanks and motorised columns, flanked by Cossack cavalry, have been crowding in for days on Tsimilianskaya'.¹⁸⁸ The *Irish Press* dedicates its entire front page to war coverage nearly every day during this period. On January 23 1943 the front page proclaims: 'Salsk Captured in Heavy Soviet Attack', 'Sanananda Japanese Overwhelmed', '44 Russian Tanks Lost at Stalingrad', 'Montgomery Closing In: British Guns Shell Tripoli'. A helpful map of 'Rostov's railway network' is provided, and the sense of excitement is fostered by bolded in-set passages such as '[a] number of Axis tanks are stated to

¹⁸⁵ Tracy, p. 13.

¹⁸⁶ Wills, p. 274.

¹⁸⁷ Wills, p. 277.

¹⁸⁸ 'RED ARMY CLAIMS MORE CAPTURES', *Evening Herald*, 6 January 1943, p.1.

have been knocked out in this engagement, then the Axis group pulled back' or 'Italian fighters shot down two Allied fighters and bombed and machine-gunned columns on the march'.¹⁸⁹ On 20 February 1943 the *Irish Times* carries a leader entitled 'The Russian Steamroller' which cannot hide its fascination and excitement about victories and defeats 'for which no parallel could be found in military history'.¹⁹⁰

In the violence of Act Three, O'Nolan brings the image of the war's atrocities, effaced by the language of the cut and thrust of military strategy, back to the fore. As Wills notes of his journalism at this time, O'Nolan's 'strategy was a persistent blurring of the contrast between nationalism and internationalism. Ireland is not just part of Europe – it is Europe itself, particularly its main warring parties'.¹⁹¹ In *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, O'Nolan clearly ties his Ulster ants, and Belfast's heavy industry (which was a target for Luftwaffe bombing during April and May 1941),¹⁹² into the cycle of production and destruction when his 'Chief Engineer' and would-be 'Dactator' roars:

Quack morch, more regiments ond more drums. A great victory is axpected!
We are stronger now than when the war storted. Our production of aircraft
ond munitions is staggerin' and mountin' every day. The tempo of our war
effort increases. Call up the 50s. Forward gallant soldiers! The home front is
behind ye! (*PT*, pp. 227, 230)

The black humour and use of a regional dialect in such a politically-charged way in Act Three of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* parallels the tactics of Kraus and his anti-war play, *The Last Days of Mankind*. Kraus evokes a world of violence and collective insanity which is fuelled by the abuse of language. His play blends jovial conversations between high-ranking officers, journalists and businessmen with apocalyptic apparitions and interventions from figures such as 'The Twelve Hundred

¹⁸⁹ *Irish Press*, 20 January 1943, p. 1.

¹⁹⁰ 'The Russian Steamroller', *Irish Times*, 20 February 1943, p. 1.

¹⁹¹ Wills, p. 289.

¹⁹² Brian Barton, *The Blitz: Belfast in the war years* (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1989). John Ryan also recalls the bombing of Dublin on 31 May 1941, 'killing many civilians in the North Strand area' and destroying 'the premises of H. J. O'Neill, the undertakers who had been in charge of the funeral arrangements for poor Paddy Dignam on Bloomsday' (p. 14).

Horses’, ‘The *Lusitania* Children’ and ‘The Dying Forest’.¹⁹³ In Scene Fifty-Five there is a ceremonial banquet in Vienna for high-ranking officers who drunkenly play on national stereotypes whilst they mix metaphors for eating and killing, as gunfire and artillery sounds in the background. Then, the frontline of the war bursts into the scene:

PRUSSIAN COLONEL [...] So, let’s have no defeatist talk! God is on our side. We’d pull it off – against a world full of devils. The enemy – be assured gentlemen – the enemy will shatter against us as against a bronze wall of flame –

*The horizon is a wall of flame. Panic-stricken sounds. Many of those present are lying under the table. Many are rushing or staggering towards the exit, some come back, their faces distorted with terror.*¹⁹⁴

Kraus deploys a dramatic strategy which is both mimetic – he parrots the idiom of generals and newspaper reporters and presents vivid images of exhausted animals, freezing prisoners and dead children – and anti-naturalistic: he compresses chronology and geography in order to juxtapose the generals dining with the images of the frontline, calling up images of destroyed nature and dead victims as speaking apparitions in a ghastly chorus. (O’Nolan would have encountered a pastiche of these Expressionist tactics in the ‘Circe’ chapter of *Ulysses*.) As Kraus’s representative character in the play, The Grumbler, reveals, the purpose of this vast assemblage is to demonstrate the terrible power of language itself. Moriz Benedikt, the editor of Vienna’s *Neue Freie Presse* and ‘Lord of the Hyenas’ in the play, is described as:

merely the leader writer responsible for the World War [...] In my play a veteran subscriber to the *Neue Freie Presse* succumbs to its lethal language – a language that convulsively expresses the ancient Jewish significance of the modern German scenario. That language overwhelms life until inflammation of the brain brings merciful release.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*, pp. 547–48.

¹⁹⁴ Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*, p. 538.

¹⁹⁵ Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*, p. 381.

Timms and Fred Bridgham explain how Kraus illustrates a feedback loop in which generals feed false information to journalists who publish that material, bolstering the generals' own delusions. Clichéd slogans that arise from conversations between the two groups in turn produce false memories and rewrite history, with deadly effects: 'By confusing political identity with biological homogeneity, the media created a frame of reference that was essentially fictitious. But this gigantic apparatus had the capacity to turn "non-events" into "action and death"'.¹⁹⁶

Act Three of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* draws a similar picture, in which language is both the acting subject and objectified presence of the violence on stage. The characters' sociolects conspire with specific language-acts to generate a spiral of escalating destruction and racial hatred. The loyalist 'awnts', against all the contradictions of their national-political identity, are cemented together by their shared dialect and their fetishized fear that the southern ants will force them by torture to 'speak Lotin' (*PT*, p. 230). In the original play, a character appears amongst the ants who is an inventor with a painfully engorged head that contains a new machine, 'the swiftest, most effective crusher of lives'.¹⁹⁷ O'Nolan also includes this character, but instead chooses to make him into a politician with an equally swollen head. Instead of a killing machine, the politician's head contains a 'gawnd ... new ... poleetical ... slogan, [...] A slogan that'll mack them join the Ormy in thousands and mullions ond hundreds of mullions of thousands, tans of thousands of mullions of mullions', and according to the Second Engineer, 'die in mullions to keep in stap' (*PT*, p. 220). O'Nolan depicts the killing machine of the original as itself a speech-act and this intense focus on language as a destructive agent continues with the play's conclusion. The emperor of the Green Ants declares his dominion over the world in Irish, and orders that the world shall only speak Irish from now on. From off-stage, a 'petulant voice' tells the uncomprehending tramp:

Do you not know your own language, you ignorant man? He is proclaiming our great victory. At this hour he becomes emperor of all the earth. History is at an end. Our glorious destiny is achieved after seventeen hundred years.
(*PT*, p. 238)

¹⁹⁶ Fred Bridgham and Edward Timms, 'Introduction' in Kraus, *Last Days of Mankind*, p. xx, citing *Die Fackel*, 726-29, p. 59-61.

¹⁹⁷ Karel and Josef Čapek, *The Life of the Insects*, p. 220.

As Tracy suggests, where Myles deviates from the Čapeks is in the depth of his ‘bracing Swiftian scorn’ which ‘leaves no room for optimism – except that the scorn is so presented as to provoke laughter, and laughter can be redemptive’.¹⁹⁸

5.9. Conclusion

Benjamin discusses Brecht and the principles of epic theatre when defining a new agenda for the emerging medium of radio in an article published in 1932, just two years prior to *Blather*’s own satirical reimagination of Ireland’s national radio service, 2RN, as 2BL.¹⁹⁹ The principle of epic theatre, he summarizes, ‘like that of montage, is based on interruption’, yet rather than providing an emotional stimulus – as in the montage techniques of film and broadcasting – in epic theatre interruption functions as a ‘pedagogical tool. It brings the action to a temporary halt, forcing the audience to take a critical position towards the proceedings and the actor to take a critical position toward his role’.²⁰⁰ The plays analyzed in this chapter deploy bold examples of the avant-garde procedure of interruption at their climaxes (the devil calling a halt to proceedings, the vagrant squashing the Irish-speaking would-be dictator ant). These interruptions force spectators to adopt ‘critical positions’ on the stories being told, such that they provoke some critics to complain that the plays do not respect the proprieties of dramatic storytelling and go too far in their political satire. The fact that O’Nolan continues to write for the stage but that further performances are not produced until much later suggests that, as with his abortive debut as a novelist with *At Swim* and the unpublished *The Third Policeman*, his plays are too transgressive to be marketable to a home audience beyond their initial bout of publicity and success. Nevertheless, the Mylesian experiment continues as a staple of Dublin’s intellectual life through his regular publication in the *Irish Times*, to which the final chapter of this thesis now turns.

¹⁹⁸ Tracy, p. 13.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Listen in to 2BL’, *Blather*, 1.3 (November 1934), p. 49, repr. in *MBM*, pp. 131–32.

²⁰⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theatre and Radio’ in *Radio Benjamin*, ed. by Leticia Rosenthal (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 365–68 (p. 367). Originally published as ‘Theater und Rundfunk, Zur gegenseitigen Kontrolle ihrer Erziehungsarbeit’, *Blätter des hessischen Landestheaters* (May 1932). Translated by Jonathan Lutes.

Chapter 6 - *Cruiskeen Lawn*, form and the avant-garde

6.1. Introduction

Cruiskeen Lawn is the grandest of O’Nolan’s achievements and yet the most difficult to approach. As an example of his generation’s erudition, cultural power and rebellious impulse, the column constitutes both a key horizon for O’Nolan scholarship and a sprawling archive of Irish cultural production. This chapter first draws upon existing readings of *Cruiskeen Lawn* to fashion its own characterization of the column, which emphasizes its formal construction as a work of quotation, arrangement and mimicry rather than a simple mouthpiece for O’Nolan. This theorization is tested through an analysis of the column’s engagement with two topics relevant to the thesis’s objective. Firstly, the chapter discusses *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s response to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, finding that – perhaps owing something to the involvement of Niall Montgomery, a published scholar on the *Wake* – the column uses montage and allusion to satirically highlight how the alterity of Joyce’s text can be compared to the alterity that inheres within another national cultural asset: the Irish language itself. Secondly, the chapter discusses Myles’s reply to exhibitions organized by the modernist wing of Irish artists during 1943–44. Its parodic reply to the letters, reviews, speeches surrounding these exhibitions demands that the art on show must be equally at home, in the quoted words of Patrick Kavanagh, ‘at the bottom of the Liffey’ (*CL*, 9 October 1944, p. 3).¹ The chapter concludes that, by using arrangement and allusion to comment without speaking directly, *Cruiskeen Lawn* espouses a cultural politics which challenges the institutional presentation of art and emphasizes the importance of specific historical contexts for artistic production. In its own alternative practice, the column posits a ‘de-aestheticized autonomy’: a radical non-originality which, divesting itself of ‘the beautiful illusion, the aura of reconciliation, projected by art for art’s sake’ criticizes the institution of art yet also resists descending to the status of another commodity, a ‘thing among things’.²

¹ As will be discussed, these words by Kavanagh are first quoted by Norah McGuinness in a letter to the *Irish Times* responding to his critical review of an art exhibition (‘The New Art Patronage’ *Irish Times*, 18 August 1944, p. 3), dated 19 August 1944 and published 22 August 1944, p. 3 and requested by Myles in *CL*, 9 October 1944, p. 3

² Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 32, citing Wolin, ‘Modernism vs. Postmodernism’, p. 16.

6.2. Form, audience and persona

John Wyse Jackson points out that O’Nolan is a ‘literary magpie’ for whom the idea of original work is antithetical to his literary project: ‘[the] use of parody and pastiche was both his strength and his weakness, and one can trace practically everything he wrote to its sources quite easily’.³ Appropriately to its attack on claims to originality, *Cruiskeen Lawn* itself is a less-than-original project. As noted by Clissmann, Cronin and Taaffe, the column is neither an original genre nor a unique response to Irish conditions, but an adaptation of an English source: the ‘By the Way’ column written by J. B. Morton in the guise of ‘Beachcomber’ for the *Daily Express* between 1924 and 1975 (and started by D. B. Wyndham Lewis in 1917).⁴ *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s reliance on devices and polemical positions from ‘By the Way’ undergirds a warning that the opinions of ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ expressed in *Cruiskeen Lawn* can never be taken at face value. Sue Asbee surmises that ‘[in] some ways the “Myles na gCopaleen” persona is too treacherous to enlist in the cause of helping to establish O’Nolan’s beliefs; reservations have to be made’.⁵ As will be demonstrated in this chapter, a close examination often bears out Wyse Jackson’s observation that ‘one can trace practically everything he wrote to its sources’ and throws doubt on Anna Teekell’s suggestion that, compared to *The Third Policeman*, ‘the column is a more straightforward (though no less playful) indicator of O’Brien’s opinions on politics and print culture during the Emergency’.⁶ In fact, the performance which is Myles na gCopaleen arranges a polyphony of conflicting personas and opinions: modelling the voices of its sources (including ‘By the Way’), satirical targets and audience alike.

This characterization certainly applies to the way that Myles responds to the avant-garde text and artworks discussed in this chapter, for as Cronin suggests, the sympathy for the philistine in *Cruiskeen Lawn* is itself modelled on the views of Beachcomber.⁷ Clissmann notes that ‘Beachcomber was a great parodist, especially of sentimental or “romantic” material. He disliked “artiness” and had a marvellous time

³ John Wyse Jackson, *Phenolphthalein: A Fictional Quest for the Eighth Plot* (London: The Cuckoo Press, 1997), p. 13.

⁴ Clissmann, p. 194; Cronin, p. 117, Taaffe, p. 133.

⁵ Asbee, p. 113.

⁶ Jackson, *Phenolphthalein*, p. 13; Teekell, p. 179.

⁷ Cronin, p. 117.

at the expense of academic, critical, and legal jargon'.⁸ Beachcomber is the foundation for *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s 'paradoxical' attitude to art and artists.⁹ However, the many voices contained within the stylistics of Myles do more than imitate Morton.

This chapter contends that, rather than a mouthpiece for O'Nolan, the column should be seen, in Stinson's coinage, as an 'avant-garde satire of the avant-garde' or, in the terms used by Bürger and Eysteinsson, as a deliberately 'nonorganic' work which refuses to state its case openly but does, through its method of arrangement, conduct a satirical commentary on cultural phenomena.¹⁰ This view is supported by Steven Young, who argues that, in contrast to what is assembled in edited collections, on many occasions the column is a bricolage of loosely stitched together quotations. These columns rely largely on a method of selection and arrangement rather than original writing: 'No editor would choose to reprint these columns', Young notes, 'and yet I think there might be some profit in an account of them'.¹¹ Young chooses to read meaning in the principle of selection and arrangement at work rather than in the material itself, detecting 'a pattern in the wild variety of these extracts, in Myles's quirk of paying close attention to writing that no one else ever reads carefully'.¹² Jon Day also examines how the editing of the columns for book-length publication threatens to efface the column's 'exploitation of the physicality of the written' and its relationship to the rest of the newspaper as both an informational context and a physical object.¹³ Adding to these arguments, this chapter suggests that a technique of pastiche – in which sources are mimicked rather than quoted directly – provides yet another means for the column to repurpose its materials by quietly changing their tone or adding new allusions.

The result is a work of expansive referentiality and a site of interaction between modernism and middlebrow print culture of the kind which has increasingly

⁸ Clissmann, p. 196.

⁹ Asbee, p. 113.

¹⁰ Stinson, p. 14; Bürger, p. 91; Eysteinsson, p. 5.

¹¹ Steven Young, 'Fact/Fiction: Cruiskeen Lawn, 1945-66' in Clune and Hurson (eds), *Conjuring Complexities*, pp. 111–18 (p. 113).

¹² Young, p. 113.

¹³ Jon Day, 'Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn: bibliographical issues in the republication of Myles na gCopaleen's journalism' in Baines (ed.), *Is it about a bicycle?*, pp. 32–48 (p. 44).

been the subject of literary scholarship.¹⁴ In his introduction to the edited collection *At War*, Wyse Jackson states the case: ‘Here was surely one of the great monuments of the century, a modernist (or rather a proleptically postmodernist) *coup de maître*, written in two primary and several secondary languages whose boundaries are repeatedly breached and confused’ (*AW*, p. 11). Just as in chapter one the complexity of *Blather*’s experiments and the bite of its politics required that we looked to both popular and avant-garde print culture to locate its commercial and cultural project, so *Cruiskeen Lawn* invites readings that place it alongside both Irish newspapers or periodicals and the broader context of European modernism and cultural criticism. As the present writer has argued elsewhere, and as Cronin and Tracy note, the key comparison for *Cruiskeen Lawn* is with another ‘great monument’ of twentieth-century satirical journalism: Karl Kraus and his periodical *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*).¹⁵

The comparisons are manifold, but in this case it is Kraus’s relationship with the figures of the Viennese intellectual elite which this chapter brings to bear as an analogy to *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s status in the cultural circles of 1940s Ireland. *Die Fackel*’s attacks on Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, the literary figures of the Young Vienna movement, politicians, newspapermen and judges, are a product of Kraus’s inhabitation of the same cultural circle as them (on a literal level, sitting at the same tables in the same coffeeshops).¹⁶ The usefulness of certain people as polemical targets is allowed to eclipse the strong relationships formed through these social settings. For example, Kraus turned on Freud after a decade of genial correspondence with him and then pursued an unremitting attack on psychoanalysis until his death.¹⁷ Kraus’s relationship with Freud throws light on *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s vendetta against the left-wing Republican writer Seán Ó Faoláin. On one level, Ó Faoláin is an ally of O’Nolan in terms of their mutual opposition to essentialist cultural nationalism. For example, one can readily compare Ó Faoláin’s 1943 editorial for *The Bell*, ‘The Stuffed Shirts’, with O’Nolan’s own 1947 manuscript, ‘The

¹⁴ Scholarship on the middlebrow is summarized by Hamill and Hussey in *Modernism’s Print Cultures*, pp. 122–50.

¹⁵ Cronin, p. 117; Tracy, p. 3. Tobias Harris, ‘The Catastrophe of Cliché: Karl Kraus, Cruiskeen Lawn, and the Culture Industry’, *Parish Review*, 3.2 (Spring 2016), 6–15.

¹⁶ For Kraus on Freud, see Szas. For a good characterisation of Kraus’s place in literary Vienna in the early twentieth century and the centrality of the coffee house see Harold B. Segel, ‘Introduction’ in *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits: 1890-1938* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 1–40.

¹⁷ Szas, pp. 12–14, pp. 20–38.

Pathology of Revivalism' (discussed in the conclusion), or with his attacks on the inauthenticity of the national cultural festivals held in the 1940s (*CL*, 1 July 1943, p. 3; *CL*, 23 October 1944, p. 3).¹⁸ *The Bell* is also a venue for three documentary articles written by O'Nolan in 1940–41, indicating his interest in collaborating with its social-realist project.¹⁹ Yet on another level Ó Faoláin is also, in Wyse Jackson's words, the epitome of the self-proclaimed artist and the 'all purpose liberal' (*AW*, p. 15) who attracts O'Nolan's ire. In October 1941, *Cruiskeen Lawn* begins sending up Ó Faoláin with its WAAMA series. Putting to one side its theoretically fascinating mediation on hoaxes and disembodied voices, the Mylesian version of WAAMA depicts Ó Faoláin's campaigning organization for Irish writers, actors and musicians as a façade for a corrupting scheme run by venal con artists.²⁰ The conspiratorial antics of *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s WAAMA series both mirror and satirize the sentiment of Frank O'Connor when he writes in 1942 that every year since Independence 'has strengthened the grip of the gombeen man, of the religious secret societies like the Knights of Columbanus, of the illiterate censorships'.²¹ These echoes between parody and sincere critique, between the said and the 'half-said' thing,²² serve to underline the fact that, although Ó Faoláin in *The Bell* and Myles in *Cruiskeen Lawn* act as observers – documenting the cultural developments of 1940s Ireland – they are also a part of the fabric of the cultural situation they comment upon. *The Bell* and its empirical studies of Irish life, along with its strident calls for freedom of expression, is aimed at the same educated, professional audience as *Cruiskeen Lawn*.²³ As in the case of Kraus and the readers of *Die Fackel*, we must be attentive to the fact that

¹⁸ As cited and discussed Ó Conaire, p. 82.

¹⁹ Flann O'Brien, 'Going to the Dogs: A Discourse on Greyhound Racing in Dublin', *The Bell*, 1.1 (October 1940), 19–24; Flann O'Brien, 'The Trade in Dublin', *The Bell*, 1.2 (November 1940), 6–15 and Flann O'Brien, 'The Dance Hall', *The Bell*, 1.5 (February 1941), 44–52.

²⁰ A similarly complex relationship can also be attributed to O'Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh. See Joseph Brooker, 'Ploughmen without Land: Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh' in Murphet, McDonald and Morrell (eds), *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, pp. 93–106 and 'The Lads in the Clouds: Myles na gCopaleen in *Kavanagh's Weekly*', *Parish Review*, 2.2 (Spring 2014), 29–32.

²¹ Frank O'Connor, 'The Future of Irish Literature', *Horizon*, 5.25 (January 1942), pp. 56–57, qtd. in Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 143.

²² Flynn, p. 80, citing *CL*, 28 November 1940, p. 4.

²³ Frank Shovlin explores *The Bell*'s status and audience in 'Was *The Bell* modernist' in Castle and Bixby (eds), *A History of Irish Modernism*, pp. 364–78.

O’Nolan’s targets are also his audience. As Wyse Jackson puts it, *Irish Times* readers are:

educated parties from Dublin’s business, professional and academic classes, and it was for these, the new Irish intelligentsia, that Myles chiefly wrote. These readers (who were mostly men) would stay with him for a generation, effortlessly absorbing his idiosyncratic social and cultural analysis of their country. Like a funfair mirror, ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ reflected their own beliefs and preconceptions back at them, with boundaries distorted and certainties doubtful. These men would be pivotal figures in the development of the new Ireland, politicians and lecturers, doctors and lawyers, writers and businessmen, Jesuits. These were the men who laid the foundations for the Utopia we have today. (*AW*, p. 10)

Wyse Jackson’s remark leads us to the second pertinent comparison with Kraus. Like *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *Die Fackel* eschews the expression of unambiguous judgements for a more supple and all-encompassing practice in which his use of language becomes, in Benjamin’s words, ‘a matrix of justice’.²⁴ Rather than simply condemn individuals for one crime or another, Kraus uses quotation to place the language of his opponents, and in turn the epoch itself, on trial.²⁵ As Wyse Jackson’s final sentence suggests, even if Myles’s judgements are themselves not to be trusted because they are often works of mimicry, his reconstruction of the world of the plain people and the rising Catholic professional class in the ‘funfair mirror’ of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is far from devoid of an ethical dimension. In this respect, Young argues that

because *Cruiskeen Lawn* casts such a wide net, is so all encompassing, it passes beyond mere parody. The newspaper may have provided the forms of discourse, but the objective was the follies and vices, both venial and mortal, of the world the newspaper expressed. Over the years, nothing in the Ireland of his time escaped his notice, so that taken as a single work, *Cruiskeen Lawn*

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Karl Kraus’ in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 258–92 (p. 286).

²⁵ Benjamin, ‘Karl Kraus’, p. 286.

seems a distorted and bizarre recreation, a monstrous caricature of the whole of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century.²⁶

The project of the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* is also one manifestation of the cultural vibrancy of Dublin, and Ireland as a whole, during the Emergency. In his history of twentieth-century Ireland, Terence Brown elaborates on the cultural developments experienced by Ireland during the period of ‘The Emergency’ despite its straitened circumstances, describing this period as a cultural ‘watershed’.²⁷ He notes how, by preserving elements of the United Kingdom’s ‘prewar life’, Dublin becomes a much more cosmopolitan city in comparison to the austerity of wartime Britain. Brown cites the recollection of Peter Kavanagh, brother of the poet Patrick Kavanagh, that Dublin at this time acquired ‘a certain international atmosphere’.²⁸ Brown also points out that cultural activity as measured by library lending and the performance of amateur dramatics rises across the country during the 1940s.²⁹ By this time, members of the UCD circle around O’Nolan are stepping into key cultural roles in Ireland, often assisted by the patronage of the *Irish Times*: O’Nolan writes *Cruiskeen Lawn* and Donagh MacDonagh is the editor of its ‘Books of the Week’ section, publishing the *Poems from Ireland* collection from contributions to this section in 1944 (as mentioned in the introduction and in chapter three).³⁰ Yet, at the same time, Irish writers used to working abroad are also confined by wartime restrictions to serving the domestic market and its tastes. As Taaffe puts it, these conditions produce a confrontation between writers and popular culture which is restaged in *Cruiskeen Lawn*:

the Emergency years ushered in a long overdue debate on the status and role of the arts in the new state. Filtered through the pages of the *Irish Times*, it was to emerge in comic dress as a clash between the corduroys and the Plain People of Ireland.³¹

²⁶ Young, p. 118.

²⁷ Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 165.

²⁸ Peter Kavanagh, *Beyond Affection* (New York: Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1977), p. 57, qtd. in Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 165.

²⁹ Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 166.

³⁰ O’Brien, *The Irish Times: A History*, p. 125.

³¹ Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys’, p. 114.

It is a complex debate, involving left-wing writers, the interventions of a culturally essentialist and activist state, the diverse voices of the Irish language movement and an anglicized popular culture subject greatly to American and British influences. In this respect, Taaffe points out that Myles, in his dialogues with the Plain People of Ireland, in fact represents ‘a cliché writ large: the persecuted writer pitted against the philistine masses’.³² The persona and self-parodying performance of Myles himself, in other words, constitutes both instrument and object of the same satirical project.

6.3. Dialogue with the *Wake*

The nature of form, audience and persona in *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s modelling of interplay between the European avant-garde and Irish cultural production is on show in the column’s numerous references to *Finnegans Wake*. The status of the column as a collaborative effort throws more light on why the *Wake* is an important presence in it. Taaffe has demonstrated through archival evidence that Niall Montgomery is writing about a third of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the late 1940s, from at least 1947 onwards, and there is little reason to believe that this collaboration did not begin much earlier.³³ Montgomery’s scholarly publications of the early 1950s demonstrate that he also occupies an important position as an Irish reader and critic of *Finnegans Wake*.

Montgomery publishes five essays on Joyce and two specifically on *Finnegans Wake*.³⁴ His first essay, ‘Joyeux Quicum Ulysse’, appears alongside O’Nolan’s ‘A Bash In the Tunnel’ in the issue of *Envoy* dedicated to Joyce which O’Nolan edits for John Ryan in 1951.³⁵ In 1953 Montgomery publishes a longer analysis of the *Wake* in the *New Mexico Quarterly* entitled ‘The Pervigilium Phoenicis’.³⁶ Here, Montgomery emphasizes Joyce’s Catholicism, his refusal of self-expression in favour of mimicry

³² Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys’, p. 117.

³³ Taaffe, p. 127.

³⁴ Alongside the two discussed below he publishes: ‘Proust and Joyce’, *The Dubliner* 4 (July/August 1962); ‘A Context for Mr Joyce’s Work’ in *The Celtic Master* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1969) and ‘Proust/Joyce: Contrasts, Analogies’, *Genèse et Métamorphoses du Texte Joycien*, ed. by Claude Jacquet (Paris: Sorbonne 1985). See the chapter and bibliography in *Niall Montgomery Dublinman*, ed. by Christine O’Neill (Dublin: Ashfield, 2015), pp. 49–68, 211–12.

³⁵ Niall Montgomery, ‘Joyeux Quicum Ulysse ... Swissairis Dubellay Gadélise’ in *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish*, ed. by John Ryan (London: Clifton, 1970), pp. 61–72.

³⁶ Niall Montgomery, ‘The Pervigilium Phoenicis’, *New Mexico Quarterly*, 23.4 (1953) <<http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol23/iss4/15>> [accessed 9 February 2020].

and his dedication to the art of the pun. O’Nolan seems to have been familiar with the essay because in a 1960 letter to O’Keeffe, he accuses Richard Ellmann of plagiarizing it ‘word for word’ in his biography of Joyce (*L*, p. 242). O’Nolan reveals broadly similar views in his essay for the special issue, ‘A Bash in the Tunnel’. The true Joyce ‘emerges, through curtains of salacity and blasphemy, as a truly fear-shaken Catholic’ and *Finnegans Wake* is either ‘[a] treatise on the incommunicable night-mind’ or ‘merely an example of silence, exile and punning’.³⁷ O’Nolan also refers to Joyce’s use of ‘the Vico theory of inevitable human and recurring evolution – theocracy: aristocracy: democracy: chaos’ in *Finnegans Wake*, mentions his use of coloured pencils to keep track of his drafts and argues that ‘[all] his works, not excluding *Finnegans Wake*, have a rigid classic pattern’, noting that Joyce’s ‘personal moral and family behaviours were impeccable’.³⁸

O’Nolan’s defence of Joyce as a ‘Catholic’ writer in *Envoy* is one phase of a lifelong interest in the task of relating the *Wake* to Ireland and the Irish language. As discussed in chapter two, by the mid-1930s O’Nolan’s comic writing is already engaged with Joyce’s *Work in Progress* on this basis and, as chapters three and four argue, his early novels can also be addressed as a response to the *Wake*. This preoccupation continues in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. In the years after *Finnegans Wake* is published it also becomes ever clearer to readers that Irish is a commonplace language in the text. Although Montgomery’s ‘The Pervigilium Phoenicis’ doesn’t identify specific Irish-language words in the *Wake*, he generally stresses Irishness and Catholicism as two of its most salient characteristics (‘Finnegan, the Phoenix Parchetype, is as Irish as *Wake* is Catholic, and there is an extraordinary richness in the association’).³⁹ In 1967 Brendan O Hehir publishes an Irish vocabulary for *Finnegans Wake* where he notes that Joyce probably attended Irish lessons ‘sporadically for about two years’.⁴⁰ In O Hehir’s view, Joyce is not a ‘profound Gaelic scholar’, for the Irish in *Finnegans Wake* is usually ‘of an elementary and commonplace character’.⁴¹ However, he argues that the listing of the first three

³⁷ Brian O’Nolan, ‘A Bash the Tunnel’ in *A Bash in the Tunnel*, pp. 15–20 (p. 19)

³⁸ Brian O’Nolan, ‘A Bash the Tunnel’, p. 20.

³⁹ Montgomery, ‘The Pervigilium Phoenicis’, p. 442.

⁴⁰ Brendan O Hehir, *A Gaelic Lexicon for Finnegans Wake And Glossary for Joyce’s Other Works* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. vii.

⁴¹ O Hehir, p. ix.

languages of the *Wake* as English, Irish, Norse in the *Scribbledhobble* notebook gives Irish a certain importance, suggesting that the order corresponds to the amount that each language has contributed to ‘modern Irish vernaculars’ and that Joyce ‘intended the languages of *Finnegans Wake* to bulk out the book in relative volume directly proportionate to this order’.⁴² Annotations gathered by readers in the online resource Fweet support the idea that Irish is an important language in the *Wake*. Fweet includes 1,397 lines in *Finnegans Wake* annotated as containing a version of a word in Irish, Shelta or one of Ireland’s secret languages (*Bearlagair Na Saer* and Bog Latin), versus 1,325 for Norse languages (old and modern Danish, Icelandic, Landsmaal and Norwegian) and, for the purposes of comparison, 2,929 in German, 1,177 in Italian and 2,032 in French.⁴³

The Irish used in the *Wake* is often connected to folklore, well-known proverbial expressions and phrases associated with Irish political and cultural nationalism. One example from early in the text which relates to the traditional theme of an encounter with the devil is: ‘Anam muck an dhou! Did ye drink me doornail?’⁴⁴ This combines the common expression ‘d’anam an diabhal’ (your soul to the devil) with the Irish word for pig, ‘muc’, and the expression for a final drink, ‘deoch an dorais’ (drink of the door).⁴⁵ O’Nolan turns to this theme in *Faustus Kelly* and the dialogues about a ‘mala’ (bag) between Niall and the devil in the first of his ‘Tales from Corkadorky’ columns on 8 February 1941 specifically echo the line ‘ana mala woe is we! A pair of sycopanties with amygdaleine eyes’ in the *Wake*.⁴⁶

George Cinclair Gibson goes beyond this stating the importance of Irish for the *Wake* to argue that a pagan Irish event, the *Teambur Feis*, ‘an extraordinary and complex array of rites, rituals, mythic and historical reenactments, sacred drama, conclaves, assemblies, funeral and inaugural ceremonies’ held during the festival of *Imbolc* at Tara, is the central exegetical context for *Finnegans Wake*, relying heavily on the fact that a confrontation between the Archdruid of pagan Ireland and Saint

⁴² O Hehir, p. ix.

⁴³ Numbers derived by searching for instances of language shorthands in *Finnegans Wake*, Fweet website <http://www.fweet.org/pages/fw_srch.php> [accessed 14 January 2020].

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Instances of the language shorthand ‘Irish’ in *Finnegans Wake*, Fweet website <http://www.fweet.org/cgi-bin/fw_grep.cgi?i=1&o=1&c=1&a=1&b=1&s=_I_> [accessed 4 September 2019].

⁴⁶ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 94.

Patrick is one of the dialogues in the *Wake*.⁴⁷ In a chapter entitled ‘The Recovery of the Dark Tongue’, Gibson compares the language of the *Wake* to a ‘language specifically designed for use by the choreographers of the *Teamhúr Feis*, the *Filidh*, Druids, and poets’.⁴⁸ This language is known as ‘bérla na filed’ (language of the poets), a version of artificial Irish which makes heavy use of Greek, Hebrew and Latin words. This dialect is used in literary texts and survives in some examples translated by Kuno Meyer.⁴⁹ Gibson describes the language as

incomprehensible in its polyglot logorrhoea; language sometimes blathering, at other times ranting, ribald, profound, or scatological, and everywhere laden with absurd catalogues of everything; language rife with riddles, and riddled with puns, neologisms, and a plethora of polysemes and portmanteaus; language literally loaded with thousands of words misspelled and malformed, bent, folded, twisted, mutilated, or torn into pieces – all of this according to a bizarre set of ‘rules’ that consistently apply, rules known [only] to the Druids and *Filidh* themselves.⁵⁰

In chapter two this thesis demonstrated how an awareness of ancient Irish traditions involving the training of poets and the construction of artificial languages informs the use of vocabulary in O’Nolan’s 1930s pastiches of *Work in Progress*. As mentioned in chapter four, the language of *The Third Policeman* also strikes us as artificial in a manner which Kenner suggests ‘derives from Irish-language mannerisms’ (and the technique of James Stephens in creating the equally artificial idiom of *The Crock of Gold* may be an influence).⁵¹ In turn, Myles na gCopaleen is drawn to the possibility for Irish as a kind of prototype Wakean language, implicitly positing a continuity between the project of *Finnegans Wake* and the rhizome-like potentials for the creation of new meaning that already exist within the Irish language. Clissmann

⁴⁷ George Cinclair Gibson, *Wake Rites: The Ancient Irish Rituals of Finnegans Wake* (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 2005), p. 5.

⁴⁸ Gibson, *Wake Rites*, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Kuno Meyer, ‘Three Poems in Bérla na Filed’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 5.1 (1905), 482–94.

⁵⁰ Gibson, *Wake Rites*, pp. 9–10.

⁵¹ Kenner, ‘The Fourth Policeman’, p. 66.

observes how in January 1941 *Cruiskeen Lawn* makes a claim for the Irish language and the Irish cultural experience as sites of unstable signification par excellence:

There is scarcely a single word in Irish (barring, possibly, *Sasanach*) that is simple and explicit. Apart from words with endless shades of cognate meaning, there are many with so complete a spectrum of graduated ambiguity that each of them can be made to express two directly contrary meanings, as well as a plethora of intermediate concepts that have no bearing on either. And all of this strictly within the linguistic field. Superimpose on all that the miasma of ironic usage, poetic license, oxymoron, plamás, Celtic evasion, Irish bullery and Paddy Whackery, and it is a safe bet that you will find yourself very far from home. (*CL*, 11 Jan 1941, p. 8)

In the contexts of a history of secret Irish scripts or languages like Ogham, *Bearlagair Na Saer*, Bog Latin or Hisperic, of nineteenth-century Irish writers emigrating to London or Paris, and of the theme of exile as a condition for writing about Ireland in the work of Joyce, Myles's assertion that, within the Irish language itself, 'you will find yourself very far from home', is pointed.⁵² He proposes an ineluctable alterity which is located within the resources of the native tongue. This manoeuvre ironizes claims for Irish as a language of the home and emphasizes the richness of performative versions of Irishness we would associate with figures like Oscar Wilde and Dion Boucicault ('Celtic evasion, Irish bullery and Paddy Whackery').

An awareness of the importance of both these Irish dramatists is another point on which the column is in dialogue with the *Wake*. Oscar Wilde and his posthumous incarnation in Hester Dowden's *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* (1924), in which Wilde denounces Joyce's work, features heavily in the text.⁵³ As O Hehir notes, Dion Boucicault (1820–1890) – the playwright whose character, Myles na Gopaleen, and play, *The Colleen Bawn*, are adopted by O'Nolan for the column – also

⁵² R. A. Stewart Macalister, *The Secret Languages of Ireland, with Special Reference to the Origin and Nature of the Shelta Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).

⁵³ In 64 lines according to Fweet, instances of the tag 'Oscar Wilde' in *Finnegans Wake*, Fweet website < http://www.fweet.org/cgi-bin/fw_grep.cgi?srch=Oscar+Wilde+&cake=&icase=1&accent=1&beauty=1&highlight=1&escope=1&tscope=1&rscope=1&dist=4&ndist=4&fontsz=100&shorth=0 >

appears frequently in *Finnegans Wake*; the online resource Fweet confirms that Boucicault or his plays are referenced in at least 62 lines.⁵⁴ In this context, Myles's proposal amounts to a satirical re-appropriation of the Irish language as a tool to engender the kind of epistemological decentring which Murphy sees as a hallmark of the European avant-garde. And of course, this manoeuvre leads us once again back to Joyce and the alterity of *Finnegans Wake*. The 11 January 1941 column illustrates this point by giving the example of the many meanings of the common Irish verb 'curta': listing everything from its accepted senses of 'putting, sending, sowing, raining' to 'a leprechaun's denture, a sheep-biscuit, the act of inflating hare's offal with a bicycle pump' to 'a porridge-mill, a fair-day donnybrook with nothing barred, a stoat's stomach pump, a broken —' before stopping and concluding 'what is the use! One could go on and on without reaching anywhere in particular'. Myles then uses the example of *An tOileánach* / *The Islandman* (1929, English translation 1951) and its many words for a boat when compared to the options available to the 'paltry English speaker'. The next paragraph makes the allusion to *Finnegans Wake* clearer:

The plight of the English speaker with his wretched box of 400 vocal beads may be imagined when I say that a really good Irish speaker could blurt out the whole 400 in one cosmic grunt. In Donegal there are native speakers who know so many million words that it is a matter of pride with them never to use the same word twice in a lifetime. Their life (not to say their language) becomes very complex at the century mark; but there you are. (*CL*, 11 January 1941, p. 8)

Native Irish speakers from Donegal are posited as living embodiments of the *Wake* and its challenging characteristics: the emission of 400 words in 'one cosmic grunt' resembling one of the ten 'thunderwords' Joyce constructs;⁵⁵ and a vocabulary so extensive that never once is a word repeated, a feat which is not quite achieved by the *Wake* even though it goes further than any other novel in the pursuit of polysemy

⁵⁴ O Hehir, p. 358.; instances of the tag 'Boucicault' in *Finnegans Wake*, Fweet website

<[http://www.fweet.org/cgi-](http://www.fweet.org/cgi-bin/fw_grep.cgi?srch=Boucicault+&cake=&icase=1&accent=1&beauty=1&hlight=1&escope=1&tscope=1&rscope=1&dist=4&ndist=4&fontsz=100&shorth=0)

[bin/fw_grep.cgi?srch=Boucicault+&cake=&icase=1&accent=1&beauty=1&hlight=1&escope=1&tscope=1&rscope=1&dist=4&ndist=4&fontsz=100&shorth=0](http://www.fweet.org/cgi-bin/fw_grep.cgi?srch=Boucicault+&cake=&icase=1&accent=1&beauty=1&hlight=1&escope=1&tscope=1&rscope=1&dist=4&ndist=4&fontsz=100&shorth=0)> [accessed 4 September 2019].

⁵⁵ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, pp. 3, 23, 44, 90, 113, 257, 314, 332, 414, 424.

and the bifurcation of sense through neologism, such that most of the words used only appear once in the text. In the hybrid Irish-English artifice of the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* we detect characteristics akin to those Montgomery praises as characteristics of the *Wake*: a heavy reliance on wordplay, ‘the pun and its tributaries’; the ‘mirroring of opposites’; and continuous ‘shadow-boxing’ and ‘hat-changing’.⁵⁶ Nicholas Allen argues that *Finnegans Wake*, ‘with its warring opposites, its conflicting testimonies and furious linguistic blurring, both registers and readjusts the experience of civil war, partition and state formation’ in early twentieth-century Ireland.⁵⁷ *Cruiskeen Lawn* recognizes this inter-relationship between text and nation when it comically dissolves the barriers separating Joyce’s difficult art from the miasma of myth, confusion and daunted appreciation surrounding the Irish language and its native speakers.

6.4. The 1943–1944 exhibitions

Visual modernism in the 1940s presents *Cruiskeen Lawn* with another opportunity to draw out hidden associations between art, history and language. The Second World War brings the White Stag group of ‘Subjective Artists’ to Dublin from London, along with a set of Irish émigré painters returning from Paris. The White Stag group is organized around two English artists, the psychoanalyst-turned-artist Basil Rákóczi (1908–1979) and his partner Kenneth Hall (1913–1946). Róisín Kennedy’s account explains that they ‘attracted the attention of other migrant artists as well as Irish artists seeking to connect with international modernism’ and ‘became the focal point of a series of exhibitions and discussions’.⁵⁸ The White Stag group ‘used the new periodicals of the Emergency such as *The Bell*, and particularly *Commentary* [...] to promote its work and ideas’.⁵⁹ In these periodicals, Rákóczi explains his work by referring ‘his readers to children’s paintings, to the work of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee and to archaic and primitive art’.⁶⁰ The Irish artists who return from Europe include the painters Louis le Brocquy (1916–2012), Mainie Jellett (1897–1944) and Norah McGuinness (1901–1988), who collaborate with the White Stag group. These artists are involved in the following major exhibitions in 1943–44: the inaugural ‘Irish

⁵⁶ Montgomery, ‘The Pervigilium Phoenicis’, pp. 441, 444.

⁵⁷ Allen, *Modernism, Ireland and the Civil War*, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Róisín Kennedy, ‘Experimentalism or Mere Chaos? The White Stag Group and the Reception of Subjective Art in Ireland’ in Keown and Taaffe (eds), *Irish Modernisms*, pp. 179–94 (p. 179).

⁵⁹ Kennedy, ‘Experimentalism or Mere Chaos?’, p. 183.

⁶⁰ Kennedy, ‘Experimentalism or Mere Chaos?’, p. 184.

Exhibition of Living Art' (IELA), which runs from 16 September 1943 to 9 October 1943; the 'Exhibition of Subjective Art' organized by the White Stag group, running from 4–22 January 1944; and the second 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art', from 14 September to 6 October 1944. The IELA becomes a successful annual fixture.

In her essay 'Plain People and Corduroys', Taaffe turns to *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s response to these wartime exhibitions of what she describes as modernist or avant-garde art in Dublin. Taaffe argues that one vector of Myles's response sides with 'cultural protectionism', when he reiterates the argument that 'these innovations simply proved that young Irish artists were now belatedly imitating European fashions'.⁶¹ But she also detects a more 'nuanced response' in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to the arrival of avant-garde art in Dublin. The White Stag group, as discussed in more detail shortly, used the term 'Subjective Art' to describe their work. Taaffe notes that Myles plays upon the idea that his 'subjective' critique is just as valid as their 'subjective' artwork. As an alternative to the contemporary notion of the artist as freethinking intellectual or 'corduroy', who is often lampooned in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Taaffe suggests that Myles praises the collectively-produced artworks of medieval Ireland: 'According to him, modern artists compared unfavourably with their medieval counterparts, "decent workmen" and modest church-goers "who simply did not know how to do a bad job"' (CL, 21 March 1944, p. 3).⁶²

However, we should be wary of taking Myles at his word. In fact, the comment resembles ideas expressed in a 1944 article by Rákóczi himself, where he repeatedly describes the artist as a 'craftsman' and longs for the return of the pre-industrial relationship between artist and public: 'the artist to-day is only too keen to find his way back to co-operation within the framework of society from which he has been ousted more and more, ever since the Industrial Revolution'.⁶³ Myles's version of the concept also parodies the widespread veneration of Ireland's medieval past in the organs of officially sanctioned Gaelic culture and the visions projected by right-wing nationalist groups discussed in chapter five. Like many statements in *Cruiskeen Lawn* that seem to express Myles's opinion, here a quotation is not far beneath the surface. Furthermore, this standpoint is just one of many views on art and literature

⁶¹ Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys', p. 121.

⁶² Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys', p. 123.

⁶³ Basil Rákóczi, 'The Artist and Society' in *Irish Art: A Volume of Articles and Illustrations* (Dublin: Parkside Press, 1944), pp. 101–3 (p. 102).

the same column has to offer: it begins by criticizing Edward Sheehy for misspelling *Finnegans Wake*; makes comments that ape reactionary opinions on the contemporary artist ('most of his books are dirty and have to be banned'); and mocks the Rákóczi position on the pre-industrial past it echoes by asserting that '[hens], for example, are skilled in the plastic arts and can produce works of art that are not only impeccable in design and delicately coloured, but edible' (CL, 21 March 1944, p. 3). Taken as a whole, the purpose of the column is not to espouse any particular viewpoint on art, medieval or modern. Instead, the text performs a juggling act which is intended to demonstrate just how many discordant opinions can be skilfully combined through the stylistic pose of the Myles na gCopaleen persona. As Taaffe herself concludes, *Cruiskeen Lawn* enables itself to become a site of interaction between the different sides of Ireland's cultural debate: 'the sophisticated machinations of *Cruiskeen Lawn* over the years allowed the column to maintain an ironic distance from corduroys and plain people alike'.⁶⁴

In a recently published essay, Luke Gibbons discusses the 'competing claims of the national and the international on art' which 'were central to controversies surrounding the establishment of the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) in the 1940s'.⁶⁵ In his discussion of an exchange between Thomas MacGreevy and Samuel Beckett about the 'the Irishness (or otherwise) of Jack B. Yeats', Gibbons notes that '[visual] modernism received a considerable impetus with the outbreak of the Second World War' as Ireland's neutrality 'brought an influx of refugees to the country' including the White Stag group, who 'held twenty-six exhibitions' during the war.⁶⁶ By examining the 'cross-purposes' at which MacGreevy and Beckett debate art and Ireland's fractured cultural heritage, his account calls attention to how particulars born from the 'contingencies of time and space' produce an alternative sense of the nation to the image projected by demands 'for a national art' that imagine Irishness 'in general, homogeneous terms, at the expense of cultural specificity'.⁶⁷ It is *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s insistence on the historicity of artworks that this chapter emphasizes in its analysis of the column's response to Dublin's visual arts in the 1940s. Where artists

⁶⁴ Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys', p. 125.

⁶⁵ Luke Gibbons, "'No Irishness intended": The Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Thomas MacGreevy, and Samuel Beckett,' in Castle and Bixby (eds), *A History of Irish Modernism*, pp. 346–63 (p. 347).

⁶⁶ Gibbons, 'No Irishness intended', pp. 346, 348–49.

⁶⁷ Gibbons, 'No Irishness intended', p. 347–48.

make claims for aesthetic autonomy and the elevation of their practice from everyday life, the column replies by demanding the integration of artworks and everyday culture. In particular, Myles responds with glee when a debate over the legitimacy of an exhibition that takes place between Norah McGuinness and Patrick Kavanagh throws up the perfect comic gesture for the most radical integration between art and life possible: throwing most of the paintings exhibited into the Liffey.

Taaffe describes the White Stag and IELA events as ‘exhibitions of abstract and surrealist art’ which ‘not only challenged the well-worn habits of Dublin’s art critics, but also the prevailing socio-cultural mode of criticism most associated with *The Bell*’.⁶⁸ By the more restrictive definition of Bürger, none of these exhibitions have truly avant-garde characteristics. As exhibitions of paintings in galleries, they may have included art which Bürger would describe as formally modernist, but they cannot be ‘defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society [...] art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis’.⁶⁹ As we shall see, *Cruiskeen Lawn* posits a similarly extreme definition of the avant-garde when Myles uses it to attack Norah McGuinness and defend Patrick Kavanagh in 1944. However, the distinction in Dublin at this time is a broader one: between the ‘academic’ tradition in Ireland as represented by the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) – that is, predominantly realist landscapes and portraits – and any artwork that deviates from this tradition. The ‘avant-garde’ in this situation refers simply to painters who adopt some of the techniques of the European modernist painting schools from the past four decades: Fauvism and post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism.

It is in this sense that S. B. Kennedy describes, in *Irish Art and Modernism*, how the genesis of the first ‘Irish Exhibition of Living Art’ lay in ‘a tussle for supremacy between the avant-garde and the more academic establishment’.⁷⁰ He describes matters as coming to ‘a head’ in 1942 when ‘two paintings by Louis le Brocquy [...] were rejected by the [RHA’s] selection committee, despite the fact that le Brocquy had exhibited at the Academy every year since 1937’.⁷¹ Kennedy cites an article published in *Commentary* by Mainie Jellett in 1942 which condemns the ‘miasma of

⁶⁸ Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys’, p. 140.

⁶⁹ Bürger, p. 11.

⁷⁰ S. B. Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism: 1880-1950* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 1991), p. 115.

⁷¹ Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism*, p. 115.

vulgarity and self-satisfaction' in the RHA's annual exhibition and states the case for an alternative to this kind of art, which she compares to 'a coloured photograph void of any creative element either of colour or form'. Jellett contends that the Academic style is, with the exception of Jack B. Yeats, devoid of 'some sign of nationality, something that would tell the onlooker that these pictures were by Irish men and women', and asks painters to delve 'deeper into the inner consciousness of our country and its natural rhythm of life' in order to 'to produce work that at least has the characteristics of youth, energy and life'. She criticizes the RHA on its own terms: for encouraging work which is technically mediocre and which does not reflect an authentic version of 'Irish art'.⁷² Jellett, who practices a form of Cubism enriched by the medieval stained-glass tradition in her abstract representations of human subjects and sacred objects, is the most innovative and modernist of the IELA's organizers. However, Kennedy describes its 'prime mover', le Brocquy, as 'not an avant-garde painter in any revolutionary manner' and its other key figure, Norah McGuinness, in similar terms; she is 'not a boldly avant-garde painter' although 'her expressive use of colour and frequently arbitrary handling of space separate her from the academic tradition' within work which, overall, is 'mildly conservative'.⁷³

Riann Coulter shows how, despite their frustration with the RHA, Jellett and the co-founders of the IELA are forced by circumstances, such as the need for exhibition space in the National College of Art, to 'secure patronage from the Director of the National Gallery and Dermot O'Brien, President of the RHA'.⁷⁴ They therefore involve the RHA in the selection process for the new exhibition and, despite having 'every reason to rebel [...] embrace both the Avant-garde and the Academic and create an institution best described as pluralistic'.⁷⁵ These circumstances and the sentiments expressed in Jellett's article show that it is incorrect to characterize the IELA's establishment as a belligerent avant-garde break from the RHA. The IELA rather seeks to break the stranglehold of the RHA on Irish standards in painting and it is better to describe it as a successful attempt to widen the envelope of acceptability in Irish visual art. Reviews of the first IELA in the

⁷² Mainie Jellett, 'The R.H.A. and Youth', *Commentary*, May 1942, pp. 5–7, cited in Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism*, p. 116.

⁷³ Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism*, pp. 122, 133, 124.

⁷⁴ Riann Coulter, 'Hibernian Salon des Refusés', *Irish Arts Review*, 20.3 (Autumn, 2003), 80–85 (p. 81).

⁷⁵ Coulter, p. 81.

press, which ‘received the exhibition well’, reflect the fact that it is more remarkable for its pluralism - in that it combines modernist work with academic work – than for disrupting the status quo.⁷⁶ A. J. Leventhal, the acquaintance of O’Nolan who, as discussed in chapters one and two, has links with Joyce and Beckett and who edits a Dadaist-inspired magazine, *The Klaxon*, in the 1920s, writes in the 1944 collection of essays, *Irish Art*, that, ‘this Exhibition must be unique in the annals of art history. Academicians hang side by side with artists whose only hope of exhibition depended on their own capital in a one-man show or on the enterprise of art dealers’.⁷⁷ The *Irish Independent* praises the show for its combination of fresh approaches with traditional subjects and themes, remarking that ‘on the whole the pictures are surprisingly conservative to be representative of the younger artists’.⁷⁸ The *Irish Times* praises the involvement of ‘our most distinguished academicians’ who have ‘chivalrously’ sent ‘works of their own to be judged alongside the “moderns”’ and declares the event to be ‘the most vital and distinguished exhibition of work by Irish artists that has ever been held’; in particular, the *Irish Times* praises the fact that ‘as is to be expected at an exhibition in the organisation of which women artists have had as much say as men, there is everywhere evidence of that elusive quality – good taste’.⁷⁹ A more nuanced version of events comes into view when we read these responses: *Cruiskeen Lawn* isn’t responding to an avant-garde protest as such, but rather to the way that a reform is confused with an avant-garde rebellion.

There is no explicit response in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to the IELA until the review of the exhibition on 4 October which is discussed below. However, the column’s daily dissection of the flotsam of everyday print culture provides a subtle (and perhaps accidental) reply to the exhibition in September. On the same day as the *Irish Times* publishes an editorial statement about the involvement of women artists lending ‘good taste’ to the exhibition, *Cruiskeen Lawn* reprints an extract from *Women’s Life* titled ‘Do You Want a Husband’ which advises women to ‘peruse the daily papers thoroughly, particularly the editorial which is always full of current interest’ so that there is ‘at least one subject on which HE will be able to say you can

⁷⁶ Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism*, p. 121.

⁷⁷ A. J. Leventhal, ‘The Living Art Exhibition’ in *Irish Art: A Volume of Articles and Illustrations* (Dublin: Parkside Press, 1944), pp. 82–93 (p. 82).

⁷⁸ Anon., ‘A Stimulating Art Display’, *Irish Independent*, 16 September 1943, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Editorial, ‘Living Art – A New Departure’, *Irish Times*, 16 September 1943, p. 3.

“talk intelligently”’. Referring to that day’s coverage of the war in Russia, Myles writes that ‘[it] astonishes me that anybody should be so anxious to get married as to go over there ← and get a lift on the crossbar between Kharkov, Bryansk and Orel’ and tries to imagine ‘the result of such a course’ (*CL*, 16 September 1943, p. 3).

The column’s explicit response arrives when *Cruiskeen Lawn* constructs its own exhibition review, punning on the fact that on 16 September 1943 the *Irish Times* review had compared the IELA to the French ‘Salon des Refusés’ (an exhibition of works rejected by the French academy which begins in 1863):

Now that I’m here I suppose I might as well review this exhibition. I have never written an informed and intelligent review of a Dublin exhibition of pictures, but pray don’t let that worry you, neither has anybody else.

Dominating the exhibition is Jack Yeats’s ‘Homage to Bret Harte,’ a sombre masterpiece of strange lights, arresting alike by reason of the deftness of the paintwork and the chaotic order of the artist’s elusive technique. Mary Swanzy’s ‘Between the Wars’ is charmingly conceived and executed with that feeling for colour which one has come to expect from her [...] ‘Constitution Hill’ by Bea Orpen, though unfortunately rather badly hung, is a beautiful thing of chromes and yellows, painted with exquisite insouciance. One cannot deal in the course of a short article with the very varied and striking exhibits and no person who is interested in art should fail to

Faugh! Who could be amused by stuff like that? I can only say that I’m damn glad there are no war pictures in this exhibition. It saves one the trouble of calling it a Salon de R.A.F.-U.S.A. (*CL*, 4 October 1943, p. 3)

The abrupt shift to a more colloquial register, combined with a reference to the ‘Salon de R.A.F.-U.S.A.’, juxtaposes the discourse of the art critic and the worldly context of political events. The pun wryly refers to how the *Irish Times* discusses cultural developments in the column next-door to its war coverage. As Brooker and Day observe respectively, the performance of Myles is a ‘function of style’ which hinges upon the materiality of language: as sound and as printed text.⁸⁰

Now, having demonstrated the importance of pastiche as a tool the column has at its disposal to participate directly in processes of cultural formation, rather

⁸⁰ Brooker, p. 90; Day, p. 44.

than merely comment on them, this chapter analyses a specific moment of that cultural process, in which *Cruiskeen Lawn* stakes out a position for its own version of Irish avant-gardism on the grounds of a single remark on the exhibitions attributed to the poet Patrick Kavanagh. On 18 August 1944 Kavanagh causes a minor storm when he reviews the 'Loan Exhibition of Modern Continental Paintings' organized by the Friends of the National Gallery. Wills records that the exhibition comprises 'works in Irish public and private collections, including cubist, impressionist, post-impressionist, and some German Expressionist works'.⁸¹ Mentioning works by Renoir, Monet, Picasso and Rouault, Kavanagh's review condemns the exhibition as 'middle class' and 'decorative', claiming that 'these painters must have lived very complacent lives' and accusing the exhibition of failing 'to project man imaginatively into the Other World'.⁸² Kavanagh's review provokes six responses. On 23 August the *Irish Times* publishes a haughty reply by 'Raoul Duffy', dated 19 August, which indirectly suggests that Kavanagh is unqualified to review the exhibition: the *Irish Times* has let 'the bull into the china shop', Kavanagh 'flogs' his 'idea [...] like a suspicious puritan' and is ignorant of the artists in question and 'their particular struggles'.⁸³ On 24 August, R. R. Figgins, speaking for the organizers, defends the exhibition and writes that Mr. Kavanagh appears to resent the 'big increase of interest in painting that has taken place during the last ten years', whereas on 26 August Kingsley Scott asserts Kavanagh's right to take a position 'as an artist'.⁸⁴ Myles's response comes on 1 September, but he focuses on the very first attacks on Kavanagh: letters from E. A. McGuire and Norah McGuinness which the *Irish Times* publishes on 22 August. McGuire, too, takes issue with Kavanagh's credentials ('The article is obviously that of a writer and not of an art critic') and his 'middle class' slur: modern painting, he writes, is 'above class and is striving to be above race' as a 'purely aesthetic pursuit [...] based on the eternal laws of harmony, balance and ordered movement'.⁸⁵ Beneath McGuire's letter the *Irish Times* also publishes a

⁸¹ Wills, p. 285.

⁸² Patrick Kavanagh, 'The New Art Patronage', *Irish Times*, 18 August 1944, p. 3.

⁸³ Letter by Raoul Duffy, dated 19 August, *Irish Times*, 23 August 1944, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Letter by R. R. Figgins, *Irish Times*, 24 August 1944, p. 3; letter by Kingsley Scott, *Irish Times*, 26 August 1944, p. 3;

⁸⁵ Letter by E. A. McGuire, dated 18 August 1944, *Irish Times*, 22 August 1944, p. 3.

sardonic reply by McGuinness which dismisses Kavanagh's opinion based on his self-confessed ignorance of art:

May I congratulate Mr. Kavanagh for having more courage than those visitors to the Exhibition of Continental Art who are afraid to utter 'lest they say the wrong thing'.

His courage is superb in being able to fill a column of the *Irish Times* on the subject of art.

I met him at the Exhibition. 'I know nothing about painting', he said, 'but I do know that with the exception of four pictures the rest of the exhibits should be at the bottom of the Liffy'.

After his self-confessed knowledge of art further comment on Mr. Kavanagh's article is unnecessary by me.⁸⁶

On 1 September 1944 *Cruiskeen Lawn* seizes on Kavanagh's reported comment in McGuinness's letter to create an image which itself is a remarkable performance:

Miss Norah McGuinness, who is in nowise to be classed with the duds, quotes Mr. Kavanagh as saying: 'I know nothing about painting but I do know that with the exception of four pictures the rest of the exhibits should be at the bottom of the Liffey.' Now among artists Mr. Kavanagh's image should evoke interest and meditation rather than anger. For if this remark proves anything, it proves that Mr. Kavanagh is a raging post-post-impressionist, far more impatient with out-moded 'academic' forms than Miss McGuinness. Take for instance that serene and charming picture 'The Seine at Argenteuil' by Sisley. How would that look at the bottom of the Liffey, the French blue slow water enlivened by our green own? Who will say that true art is not materially and majestically implicated in that flux of dissident modes and morphologies, the impact of the real on the 'interpreted,' the live Dublin pinkeen nosing for grub in the soil of the Gallic bank? It would be a difficult thing to achieve physically in a manner that would permit of adequate inspection but the idea is far less fantastic than those of the French surrealist brethern [sic], who probably dislike Sisley far

⁸⁶ Letter by Norah McGuinness, dated 19 August 1944, *Irish Times*, 22 August 1944, p. 3.

more than does Mr. Kavanagh and who have frequently implored people who attend their exhibitions to bring hatchets and hammers so that they may demolish anything they dislike – even boxes of paints so that they may ‘improve’ exhibits that seem to stand in need of such treatment!

The promoters of the present exhibition talk with awe of the ‘fauves’ – the wild beasts who shattered with pitiless talons whatever remained of the academic impressionism, the boys who took nothing for granted, made their own rules and certainly took nobody’s word that any given picture was ‘good’. Did they know about art, any more than Mr. Kavanagh? The rather embarrassing fact is that Mr. Kavanagh is himself, according to any known method of artistic mensuration, a ‘fauve’, and it seems extraordinary that he should be attacked for exhibiting this prepossessing attribute. Art, remember, does not vary intrinsically as between different media or techniques. Mr Kavanagh’s *saeva indignatio* seems to be what the promoters of the Exhibition are anxious to propagate. Why then write bitter letters to the paper about him? And why – above all – pretend that artistic appreciation is not middle class? (*CL*, 1 September 1944, p. 3)

By reframing Kavanagh’s suggestion as, in fact, the *only* authentically avant-garde performative gesture amidst all the modernist exhibitions so far, *Cruiskeen Lawn* demonstrates its awareness of the anti-institutional practices which are the focus of Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde. Myles deploys this understanding of the historical avant-garde when he reminds McGuinness that Surrealists contest the very notion of an exhibition. They have ‘frequently implored people who attend their exhibitions to bring hatchets and hammers so that they may demolish anything they dislike’ and challenge the concept of aesthetic autonomy by asking whether ‘true art is not materially and majestically implicated in that flux of dissident modes and morphologies, the impact of the real on the “interpreted”’. Myles’s defence of Kavanagh on these grounds – with a nod to the ‘savage indignation’ of Swift’s epitaph – is a comparison that encodes a critique of Irish painting and a preference for certain kinds of Irish writing. Although earlier in the column Myles says ‘there is no major personality in Irish letters today’, by suggesting that Kavanagh is the authentic Irish version of a ‘fauve’ (the post-impressionist French painters who take impressionism in a more abstract direction through a bolder, less representational use

of colour), the column implies that the more authentic modernists in the 1940s are jobbing writers instead of ‘middle-class’ artists.

Brooker suggests that there are strong affinities between work produced by Kavanagh and O’Nolan at this time, arguing that *An Béal Bocht* (1941) and Kavanagh’s poem *The Great Hunger* (1942) ‘stand as two of literature’s major critical responses to independent Ireland, specifically the sociology and ideology of its rural life’.⁸⁷ Brooker also points out that O’Nolan publishes an attack on *An Tóstal*, a culturally nationalist festival, in the short-lived *Kavanagh’s Weekly* periodical in 1952.⁸⁸ The literary context which inspires Myles to describe Kavanagh as a ‘fauve’ is perhaps his reading of *The Great Hunger*. As Declan Kiberd observes and Taaffe notes, the poem broke with an elevated poetic register and ‘riskily stretched the poetic line to the slackness of everyday speech’.⁸⁹ Brooker judges *The Great Hunger* as a counter-pastoral which ceaselessly ‘varies poetic forms’ to produce an ‘extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented challenge within Irish poetry’.⁹⁰ In this light, the column’s defence of Kavanagh achieves a rhetorical effect which is of key significance for understanding *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s participation in the Irish cultural upsurge of the Emergency. It is a comparison which relies on both the author’s knowledge of recent European art history and his sense of significant Irish writing, combining the two to draw out ethical questions implicit in the juxtaposition. That is to say, *Cruiskeen Lawn* selects the conflict between Kavanagh and McGuinness because, by placing it in a wider context of avant-garde European art, the column can reveal an historical truth without committing to the expression of an opinion (much in the same way that Krausian journalism and drama achieves its most potent effects). Myles suggests that it is writers from Catholic Ireland, sitting outside the fading yet still influential Anglo-Irish intellectual establishment and intervening in cultural life without official sanction, through newspapers and periodicals, who represent the pre-eminent response to the Irish situation of the 1940s.

⁸⁷ Joseph Brooker, ‘Ploughmen without Land: Flann O’Brien and Patrick Kavanagh’ in Murphet, McDonald and Morrell (eds), *Flann O’Brien and Modernism*, pp. 93–106 (p. 95).

⁸⁸ Joseph Brooker, ‘Ploughmen without Land: Flann O’Brien and Patrick Kavanagh’, p. 104, citing Myles na Gopaleen, ‘How Are You Off For Tostals?’, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, 1.5 (10 May 1952), p. 4.

⁸⁹ Taaffe, p. 116, citing Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, pp. 594–96.

⁹⁰ Brooker, ‘Ploughmen without Land: Flann O’Brien and Patrick Kavanagh’, p. 100.

On 5 June, the *Irish Times* announces plans for the second IELA which is now an accepted part of the Academy's calendar. The next exhibition takes place 'under the patronage of Dr. Alton, Provost of Trinity College' and 'Mr. Dermot O'Brien, President of the Royal Hibernian Academy'. As in the first exhibition, the *Irish Times* describes its objective as making 'available to a large public a comprehensive survey of significant work, irrespective of school or manner, by contemporary artists'.⁹¹ Two weeks later, on 17 June, there is a spread in the *Times Pictorial* of artists photographed at the RHA exhibition which had taken place during the preceding weeks.⁹² Whereas in 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* mimics an exhibition review, these stories inspire the column to go one step further and parody an exhibition opening speech. The speech, occupying the entire column with no framing material either side, consists of Myles talking in an elaborate autocritical way about himself:

Now I must say to you what I believe and you must not laugh, because I am frightfully serious in this – I believe that in Art, Myles is a . . . Carthaginian; and by that I mean he sees life as endless flux, perpetual movement. If you look at No. 2 over there, you will see that Myles calls it "Picture with Frame." Really, simplicity was never simpler, and I do think I am not guilty of that terribly Irish vice – it *is* Irish, really – of trying to read meaning where none are intended when I say that to me this is a synoptic purified intuition of metempsychosis. If you look at it you will see what I mean and then again, No. 5 over there called 'Electric Fan-Danger' (though Myles, I think, always thought of it as 'Steam Roller' – so like him!) if you look at that you will see that there again the title gives no hint. [...] to me No. 5 is the hierophantic, Egyptian spirit as reflected in, say, cuneiform, 'calligraphic' mysticism of the Hyksos voluptuaries but *after* it has passed through the purifying crucible of Byzantium, just as later on we can see – take for example No. 18 and No. 34 – how Myles through the agony of his personal experience and with the special aura of his very personal philosophy, has 'learned' to see with the 'distorted,' dazzled vision of a dieu manqué, a Rimbaud, a William Dunbar. And so, ever so gently

⁹¹ Anon., 'Second Exhibition of Living Art', *Irish Times*, 5 June 1944, p. 1.

⁹² Anon., 'Academicians of To-morrow', *Times Pictorial*, 17 June 1944, p. 1

(Figures suddenly leap from the frames and dash out of the door).

(*CL*, 26 June 1944, p. 4)

This parody illustrates the extraordinary density of quotation and allusion which the use of the Myles persona as a container for a wide variety of material permits in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. In this extract, we progress from a vaguely Bergsonian opening, to a Joycean reference to metempsychosis, and then to the mention of a steam roller which recalls the frequent discussions of ‘steam men’ in *Cruiskeen Lawn* itself during this period.⁹³ Then the terms of reference for the speech expand to encompass Egypt (perhaps a nod to Joyce’s use of concepts from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in *Finnegans Wake*), a Yeatsian reference to the ‘purifying crucible of Byzantium’,⁹⁴ and finally Arthur Rimbaud and William Dunbar. This performance of credibly erudite nonsense demonstrates O’Nolan’s stylistic fluency in order to provide him with a semi-autonomous vantage point that enables the column’s critique. He is able to imitate them, but they are unable to reply to him in kind. Myles is then able to deliver the punchline: a painter is abandoned by his own paintings. It is a rebellion which, of course, resonates with the theme of a revolt against restricting notions of art and the artist discussed in chapters one, two and three.

At various points in the extracts cited in this chapter, *Cruiskeen Lawn* problematizes the framing of the 1943–44 exhibitions as ‘avant-garde’. This column crowns that sequence with an extended comic meditation on the notion of framing itself. The excessive framing of Myles’s opening speech overwhelms his own

⁹³ ‘Steam men’ is, in fact, a topic which the column consistently interweaves with its coverage of the IEA and White Stag exhibitions. For example, in the same column as the response to Herbert Read which is discussed above, *Cruiskeen Lawn* reprints a letter, apparently from a self-described ‘steam man’, concerning the loss of steam engines from Ireland’s railways. In his reply, Myles solemnly intones that ‘[the] steam roller has been solely responsible for keeping alone the old steam crafts in rural Ireland and it is well-known that our peasants had a seán-nós, or traditional method [of] driving a steam roller’ (*CL*, 10 January 1944, p. 3). The translation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915; in English, 1933) into a tale of the temporary metamorphosis of a man into a steam engine, a literal steam man, is the subject of a story O’Nolan publishes as Flann O’Brien in 1940, ‘John Duffy’s Brother’, *Irish Digest* (June 1940), 69–73.

⁹⁴ Referring of course to ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ published in *The Tower* in 1928 (Yeats, p. 239) but also perhaps to Yeats’s theory of perfection as impersonality in *A Vision* (1925) where ‘Byzantium stands at the apex of civilisation where the individual becomes the mass, the mass individual’. Allen, *Modernism, Ireland and the Civil War*, p. 73.

paintings, but his figures are miraculously able to ‘leap from’ their frames and escape into the street to take up their places amongst the Plain People of Ireland. The joke is an eerily literal rendition of Bürger’s idea that avant-garde practices are designed to remove art from the gallery and place it into the ‘life praxis’.⁹⁵ However, the image also possesses a fantastic and surreal quality which, in line with Wolin’s revision of Bürger, preserves its standpoint of relative autonomy as a creative work.

As Taaffe notes, when the second IELA is held in September, Myles at first critiques it for being ‘a sedate anthology of reproductions of academic art’ because the work on show is derivative of avant-garde art from the 1920s (*CL*, 28 September 1944, p. 3).⁹⁶ In his second response, on 6 October, Myles brings in the context of the European war in what Gibbons describes as an ‘acute observation’ which stresses ‘the *cultural specificity* of modernism itself in the Great War era and its aftermath’ (emphasis in original).⁹⁷

Here, then, is my point. A number of you reasonably nourished and well-clad Irish visit the continent. You see and examine carefully certain works of art which come out of an occult premonition of agony. (The premonition has been fulfilled). You copy these works with a fidelity that does you credit [...] But you were – and are – without the impulses which evoked this art. You are only pretending to be troubled. They say it’s easy to sleep on another man’s wound. It’s even easier to squeal when you are not hurt at all. (*CL*, 6 October 1944, p. 3)

As Gibbons notes, ‘Myles’s point about a vicarious avant-garde is well made, as is his insistence that forms of disintegration in modernism were convulsed responses to the forces that plunged Europe into the Great War and its aftermath’.⁹⁸ Myles’s allusion to Ernie O’Malley’s 1936 civil war memoir, *On Another Man’s Wound*, is important in this context.⁹⁹ O’Malley both participates in the violence of the civil war

⁹⁵ Bürger, p. 49.

⁹⁶ Taaffe, p. 122.

⁹⁷ Gibbons, ‘No Irishness intended’, pp. 357–58.

⁹⁸ Gibbons, ‘No Irishness intended’, p. 358.

⁹⁹ Ernie O’Malley, *On Another Man’s Wound: Reminiscences of the Irish struggle, 1916-21* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1936).

as a soldier and, as a writer, art critic and historian, interrogates the meaning of that violence. O'Malley was 'perhaps the most articulate and conventionally "cultured" of the Republicans who survived the Irish Revolution', leading a life marked by 'auto-didacticism' and a 'never-institutionalized erudition', according to David Lloyd.¹⁰⁰ By alluding to a figure who irreproachably deals with both revolutionary violence and avant-garde art, before stating that it's 'even easier to squeal when you are not hurt at all', Myles acts as a check on the Irish modernist painters by suggesting that they are claiming as a purely aesthetic phenomenon something which in fact arises as a response to the devastation of Europe in the First and Second World Wars.

Yet we must also treat this statement of 'my point' carefully, as the column proceeds to subtly debunk itself by ending with a faked footnote for a statement earlier on. The source for '[the] disintegration of European morality I have dealt with fully in another place' is given as '*Studies*, March, 1923'. Gibbons notes that Myles's allusion to Ernie O'Malley's Civil War novel, *On Another Man's Wound* (1936) can also be read as a signal towards the fact that, though the violence was on a 'lesser scale', the Irish revolution and the civil war 'shook the foundations not only of Ireland but also the British Empire'.¹⁰¹ *Cruiskeen Lawn* always creates, as Timms writes of Kraus, 'oblique forms of discourse, designed to stimulate thought rather than express opinions'.¹⁰² There may be recurring themes, such as the question of the legitimacy of art in the face of the historical process, as discussed here. However, like Kraus, Myles will not settle into the role of an embittered polemicist as he is often caricatured. If we resist the temptation to read the columns as straightforward expressions of opinion, we see that the arrangement of texts, pastiche and allusion in *Cruiskeen Lawn* valuably historicizes debates that too often confine themselves to questions of form, taste and artistic credentials.

6.5. Conclusion

At various stages, this thesis has explored how the collaborative context for his writing makes it problematic to view O'Nolan as an outsider to the groups he critiques. He is more of a participant-observer: a Joycean and a satirist of Joyce; a

¹⁰⁰ David Lloyd, 'On Republican Reading: Ernie O'Malley, Irish Intellectual' in *Modern Ireland and Revolution: Ernie O'Malley in Context* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2016), pp. 79–106 (p. 80).

¹⁰¹ Gibbons, 'No Irishness intended', p. 358.

¹⁰² Timms, *Karl Kraus*, II, p. 130.

novelist and a pathologist of novel-writing; a dramatist and a lampooner of thespian culture. We do not know whether O’Nolan or a collaborator such as Montgomery visits the various exhibitions that the column lampoons, although it seems likely that they do. Undoubtedly, the fake review of 4 October 1943 and the imitation opening speech of 26 June 1944 are examples of how *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s response to the Dublin avant-garde ‘passes beyond mere parody’ and participates directly in the cultural processes it critiques.¹⁰³ In this respect the column is similar to *The Bell*, which is closely involved with these exhibitions as a venue for reviews and statements from the organizers, along with *Commentary*, which also covers ‘the surge of interest in modern art’.¹⁰⁴ Looking beyond Myles’s displays of invective against the artists and reviewers, it is possible to read these columns as a form of collaboration and participation in a remarkable cultural moment for Dublin and Ireland. Whilst the Emergency causes material shortages of many physical staples, Dublin’s neutral status leads to a flowering of cultural production, such that, as Wills observes, ‘[by] the end of the war, some of the literati were starting to congratulate themselves on everything that had been achieved’.¹⁰⁵ This cultural moment includes *Cruiskeen Lawn*: the fact that an account of Myles’s parodic WAAMA League is now far easier to find than an account of the historical WAAMA on which it is based, when ‘[writers], artists, actors and musicians displayed their new confidence by getting together in a new organisation’, should not occlude the truth that the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* is part and parcel of this newfound confidence among writers and artists.¹⁰⁶ Referring to Eysteinsson’s model of the ‘dynamic reciprocity’ between modernism and the avant-garde, the satirical performances of the column may be seen to operate as the ‘cutting edge’ of an Irish modernist wave occurring during the Emergency, ‘teasing out the radical elements of modernism whenever it appears to be losing its edge’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Young, p. 118.

¹⁰⁴ Wills, p. 305.

¹⁰⁵ Wills, p. 307.

¹⁰⁶ Wills, p. 305.

¹⁰⁷ Eysteinsson, p. 178.

CONCLUSION

Enda Duffy writes of ‘the extent to which Irish modernists managed *not* to absorb potential influences from European writers and artists’ (original emphasis).¹ He suggests that ‘one can only imagine, if the Irish had been more adventurously open to Dada, German Expressionism or Russian Futurism, how much more radical and exciting an Irish modernist art might have become, and how its influence on Irish life and politics might have been much greater’.² This thesis has shown how, counter to Duffy’s observation, O’Nolan’s work during the period examined, especially when viewed as a collective production that draws upon the experiences of Montgomery, Sheridan and others, *does* engage with these European avant-garde movements and to no small degree. The resulting body of work is, just as Duffy suggests it might be, radical and exciting. Not only does O’Nolan’s work gather momentum from its continual engagement with mass culture, just as the European avant-gardes do: his texts mobilize those contexts to establish a vantage point of relative autonomy which enables a politically-charged intervention into Irish culture during the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, through O’Nolan’s enduring relevance and influence, his work constitutes a significant and ongoing act of Irish cultural production; there remains a great deal of unrealized potential in the texts associated with the many identities that swirl around the life of Brian O’Nolan. Not least of this potential is his legacy as a cultural critic. There is a glimpse of such an O’Nolan in a remarkable manuscript mentioned briefly in chapter three and known, from one of its chapter titles, as ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’.³ Here, a voice of O’Nolan as a cultural critic and polemicist emerges in a way which (as chapter six found) simply eludes us in his journalism. The style of argument in this manuscript, more than anywhere else, supports the claims that each chapter of this thesis has made for O’Nolan as a generational voice highly engaged with some of the most pressing issues facing Ireland at the intersection of culture, language and history.

¹ Enda Duffy, ‘Irish Modernism: The European Influence’ in Castle and Bixby (eds), *A History of Irish Modernism*, pp. 160–75 (p. 172)

² Duffy, ‘Irish Modernism: The European Influence’, p. 172.

³ This manuscript was introduced by Carol Taaffe in ‘The Pathology of Revivalism: An Unpublished Manuscript by Myles na gCopaleen’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 32.2 (Fall 2006), 27–33 and a discussion of it forms the conclusion of her chapter on the ‘Irish Myles’ (Taaffe, pp. 119–25).

As Taaffe notes, the manuscript is likely to have been written in 1947 and is probably annotated by Montgomery.⁴ There are three extant chapters: ‘Decline and Revival’, a historical sketch of the fall of Irish; ‘What is the position of the Gaeltacht[?]’, a ‘statistical examination of the decline of Irish throughout the country as well as a discussion of government policy on the preservation of the language and the Gaeltachts’; and ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, which turns its attention to the Gaelic League itself and which Taaffe regards as an ‘iconoclastic [...] broadside on revivalist polemics’.⁵ Taaffe praises the unconventional historiography of ‘Decline and Revival’, which ‘challenges a cultural history popularly distorted through a post-revival perspective’.⁶ In this chapter, O’Nolan argues that

the herding of the Catholic Irish-speaking masses to live in great poverty in a bookless ghetto could have no other result than to fortify their tongue, though only as a spoken tongue, and indeed bring to pass the miracle of a whole civilisation preserved orally, with tales and poetry in the people’s memories and their wisdom transfixed in proverbs.⁷

He reminds readers that the oral culture so valued by the nation is a function of Ireland’s colonial repression: ‘It follows that the relaxation of the Penal Laws brought a serious threat to the Irish language’ when its speakers, ‘emerging from their “dark night”’, found ‘not only that the whole civilisation to which they now had some access was English-speaking and Anglicised, but that English was and long had been the chosen language of their own champions’.⁸ Taaffe argues that the manuscript’s ‘emphasis on the economic pressures which contributed to language decline, while necessary in itself, arguably led to an understatement of the more insidious effect of cultural influences which conspired to cast Irish as a “barbaric” and anachronistic language’.⁹ Taaffe’s criticisms are certainly valid. However, it is also important to note the significance of the argument: O’Nolan seeks to reconfigure our understanding of

⁴ Taaffe, p. 119.

⁵ Taaffe, p. 119.

⁶ Taaffe, p. 122.

⁷ *BC*, 2/43, ‘Decline and Revival’, p. 3.

⁸ *BC*, 2/43, ‘Decline and Revival’, p. 4.

⁹ Taaffe, p. 122.

the language's decline and revival in materialist terms. He attempts to understand the situation of Irish speakers in terms of their immediate socio-economic interests rather than as the notional bearer of the cultural legacy of 'Irish Ireland'. This pragmatic materialism lies behind his critique of government economic policy and his advocacy of state-supported industry as a means of reviving the Gaeltacht.

O'Nolan seeks in the latter part of 'Decline and Revival' and in 'The Pathology of Revivalism' chapter to explain the failure of the revivalist movement in terms of the collective psychology of its adherents. He argues that the 'separatist' movement adopts language revival as a substitutionary solution to the real problem of economic and political independence, thus locking together the question of the Irish language with the exclusionary rhetoric of 'separatism' in a false unity:

It is not easy to say whether the movement to revive Irish as a spoken language, was (and indeed is) a means or an end. It is not unlikely that the revival movement was, to use Freudian jargon, a sublimation of the unbroken separatist tradition, which was enfeebled and frustrated after the death of Parnell, and that the language movement simply represented a completely fresh approach to an old problem which was purely political, fiscal and agrarian and not concerned with language or rival cultures [...] Either separatism created the Gaelic League, or the Gaelic League revived separatism.¹⁰

This insight underpins O'Nolan's pathology of the revivalist movement. Its failings, and their ramifications in the interventions of government policy, are not mistakes, but the immanent results of a process of intellectual formation which O'Nolan's writing identifies with right-wing nationalism. It is as a result of this pathology at the heart of the 'separatist' movement that government proposals to revive Irish by state decree are 'savage to the point of impossible savagery' and Ireland is hobbled by a 'mentality which, believing that the state can effect anything it pleases by issuing decrees, thinks that these miraculous powers should be exercised primarily in the interests of abolishing English rather than abolishing poverty, vice and death'.¹¹

¹⁰ *BC*, 2/43, 'Decline and Revival', p. 9.

¹¹ *BC*, 2/43, 'The Pathology of Revivalism', p. 5.

O’Nolan’s Gaeilgeoir does not wish to see Irish revived alongside English but instead cherishes the pathological delusion that it can be extended even to non-Irish speaking areas as the sole spoken language. As such, the Gaeilgeoir ‘continues to believe that he is engaged in a “revival” which, at the present rate of going, will be characterised within 50 years by the death of the last native speaker’.¹² The pathology of revivalism is that its fervour to achieve its ends at any cost will consume the language revival project altogether. The dialectical nature of this argument probably reflects O’Nolan’s understanding of Freudian concepts like sublimation, as his reference to ‘Freudian jargon’ in the manuscript itself and various other references to Freud in *Cruiskeen Lawn* attest.¹³ The manuscript’s style also mirrors the contemporary cultural criticism of a Frankfurt School writer indebted to Freud, Theodor Adorno, in works such as *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). In this polemic, Adorno attacks the language of post-war German idealist existentialism, such as Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and, in his view, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), arguing that their philosophy has become a jargon in which the purveyors’ ‘words [...] sound as if they said something higher than what they mean’.¹⁴

The jargon must defend, so as not to be lost, transitory social forms which are incompatible with the contemporary state of the forces of production [...] The bourgeois form of rationality has always needed irrational supplements, in order to maintain itself as what it is, continuing injustice through justice [...] The jargon strives to turn the bitterness of the indigenous, of the mute, into something like a metaphysical-moral verdict of annihilation against the man who can speak out.¹⁵

In a similar mode, O’Nolan accuses the Gaels of legitimizing the oppression of the Gaeltacht regions in contemporary Ireland by constructing their own jargon of authenticity, a patois of Gaelicness which ignores the reality of domination by conjuring up a ‘world, ready-made with its own proprietary language, “amusements”

¹² *BC*, 2/43, ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, p. 2.

¹³ *CL*, 24 May 1960, p. 8; *CL*, 11 August 1962, p. 8.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, German, 1964), p. 9.

¹⁵ Adorno, pp. 47–48.

and “work” which is ‘a standing invitation to those naturally disinclined to face life’.¹⁶ Adorno links the irrationalism of the existentialist jargon to the irrationalism of National Socialism by arguing that a new idiom becomes necessary to replace the jargon of National Socialism. All of these jargons are the manifestation of false consciousness in bourgeois society: appeals to the irrational which clothe the instrumental rationality of capitalism. Like Bürger’s characterization of the institution of art, this argument can be rooted in Herbert Marcuse’s deployment of Marx’s analysis of religion as a means of understanding the ‘affirmative’ role of culture.¹⁷ O’Nolan often seems to view essentialist Irish nationalism as ‘affirmative’ in this way. The Gaeilgeoir turn away from the misery of the Gaeltacht and towards an idealized Gaelic lifestyle and culture is, in one sense, a critique of existing society because it highlights the difference between the fantasy and the reality. On the other hand, the fetishes of the self-proclaimed Gaels – their kilts, Gaelic athletics and bicycle-clips – isolate its critique of the current social order within their own subculture; that is, in a ‘world, ready-made with its own proprietary language, “amusements” and “work”’.¹⁸

Such a sublimation of political nationalism inside an esoteric subculture also bears comparison with the fascist ‘aestheticization of politics’ in Benjamin’s theory of art, developed in parallel with Marcuse’s conception of affirmative culture. In the epilogue to the third version of his ‘Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility’ (a manuscript completed by April 1939), Benjamin writes that fascism ‘sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses – but on no account granting them rights’.¹⁹ Benjamin concludes his essay by analyzing Marinetti’s manifesto for the Italian colonial war in Abyssinia. The glorification of war as an aesthetic gesture is ‘the consumption of *l’art pour l’art*. Humanity’s ‘self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure’.²⁰ This notion, that the subordination of politics and polities to the aesthetic must inevitably consume itself in bloodshed and annihilation, is exactly the thinking which leads O’Nolan to connect his pathology of the Gaels to the experience of culture in contemporary European fascism. He dryly observes that ‘Ireland can be made 100

¹⁶ BC, 2/43, ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, p. 2.

¹⁷ Marcuse, ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, pp. 65–98.

¹⁸ BC, 2/43, ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, p. 2.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, V, p. 269.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, V, p. 270.

per cent Irish-speaking in one day, given enough guns and ropes and a state decree providing for the execution of all non-Irish speakers'.²¹

O'Nolan's countervailing proposal appears to be that the Irish language deserves not suffocation in Gaeilgeoir fantasies of a monoglot Ireland, but protection as an integral component of the heterogenous heritage of English-medium Irish cultural life. This perspective is expressed in a letter about *An Béal Bocht* to Sean O'Casey where O'Nolan discusses the merits of preserving Irish for aesthetic and cultural reasons. He writes that knowledge of the Irish language remains a necessary literary substrate, an 'unknown quantity' enabling Irish writers to 'transform the English language' (14 April 1942, *L*, p. 116). Taaffe also refers to a column published in October 1943 in which, on similar grounds, Myles defends government spending on language revival against charges that it would be better spent on slum clearance. Here he argues that Irish 'provides through its literature and dialects a great field for the pursuit of problems philological, historical and ethnological' and is 'ingratiating by reason of its remoteness from European tongues and modes of thought, its precision, elegance and capacity for the subtler literary nuances; it attracts even by its surpassing difficulty' (*CL*, 11 October 1943, p. 3). As Brooker notes, a letter that O'Nolan publishes in the tenth issue of *Kavanagh's Weekly* makes a similar point when defending Irish from comments made by the Kavanagh brothers:

Any notion of reviving Irish as the universal language of the country is manifestly impossible and ridiculous but the continued awareness here of the Gaelic norm of word and thought is vital to the preservation of our peculiar and admired modes of handling English.²²

Mark O'Brien writes in his history of the *Irish Times* that the very introduction of *Cruiskeen Lawn* as an Irish-language column owes something to the fact that O'Nolan's editor R. M. Smyllie's 'philosophy on the language was the same – that it stood a better chance of survival if it were not rammed down people's throats'.²³

²¹ *BC* 2/43, 'The Pathology of Revivalism', p. 6.

²² Myles na gCopaleen, 'Letter to the Editor', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 10, 14 June 1952, p. 4, repr. in *Parish Review*, 2.2 (Spring 2014), p. 13, qtd. in Joseph Brooker, 'The Lads in the Clouds: Myles Na gCopaleen in *Kavanagh's Weekly*', *Parish Review*, 2.2 (Spring 2014), 29–32 (p. 32).

²³ O'Brien, *Irish Times*, p. 125.

O’Nolan’s alternative proposal for protecting the language is embodied in his own aesthetic practices, which use intertextuality and interfusionality to resituate the revival of Irish within the historical process. The ongoing success of *An Béal Bocht* is a partial realization of his work’s implicit promise to revive Irish-language literature at the same time as it ferociously satirizes the Gaels. As Smyllie correctly observes in *The Bell* in 1942: Myles ‘has done more than anyone else for the future of the Irish language’.²⁴ The importance of language for O’Nolan as a concrete social reality motivates his writing to break down the walls of what threatens to become a carceral tongue with strategies of collage and montage. His goal is to reinvigorate Irish-language cultural material, thus leading it away from ‘separatism’ without compromising the nationalist orientation of his circle. Although O’Nolan is no communist, this manoeuvre can be compared to Benjamin’s response to the fascist aestheticization of politics: ‘*communism replies by politicizing art*’ (emphasis in original).²⁵

The method used in this thesis has also drawn attention to one of its central arguments: formal or theoretical readings of O’Nolan’s work alone are not sufficient to explain its significance, yet neither is the social content of his work detachable from those formal techniques. As such, we can read in O’Nolan’s work an important statement on the question of aesthetic autonomy: the intricate construction of O’Nolan’s work – primarily, its use of montage – reveals an attempt to establish a vantage-point from which to critique society without ever claiming the autonomous status of art or literature. His work is so aware of the situation of the artist as a subject of the historical process that it becomes exceptionally inventive through the same method that makes it radically non-original: a skilful technique of collage and montage construction that allows O’Nolan to carve out a space for a critically engaged practice whilst swerving any claim to the creation of organically complete artworks. To apply Murphy’s conception of the avant-garde, O’Nolan doesn’t attempt a utopian integration of art and life, but rather undertakes a “cynical” sublation of art and life [...] destroying any lingering sense of aesthetic harmony and of organic structuring, so that the work of art leaves the realm of ideal and harmonious forms, and descends to the disjointed world of modernity’.²⁶

²⁴ Anon., ‘Meet R. M. Smyllie’, *The Bell*, 3.3 (1942), 180–88 (p. 187), qtd. in O’Brien, *Irish Times*, p. 126.

²⁵ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, *Selected Writings*, V, p. 270. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 34.

Chapter one argued that *Blather* is a Dadaist magazine precisely in its dialogue with the forms and content of Irish popular culture, establishing an intermediary standpoint from which to stage its anti-authoritarian assault on the establishment. Chapter two examined how form and social content interweave in the interfusionality of ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ as a reply to *Finnegans Wake*. The very difficulty of this text represents a satirical mediation of modernism and different approaches to language revival and the native culture. Chapter three found the montage technique used in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to create a meticulous document of Irish print culture, arguing that this technique flows into O’Nolan’s avant-garde satire from tributaries such as a Romantic-era focus on the materiality of texts. Chapter four characterized *The Third Policeman* as a novel informed by Kafka’s methods in which montage rises to the level of allegory to render its making strange of Irish history endlessly open to reinterpretation. Chapter five argued that plays accused of failing for being insufficiently modernist in fact participate in the most politicized form of modernist theatre, making anti-fascist gestures at the height of the slaughter of the Second World War. Chapter six sought to demonstrate how social content emerges from the arrangement of material in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, with the Myles persona enabling this extraordinary orchestration rather than speaking directly. Each text analyzed is marked by the participation of a close circle of O’Nolan’s co-writers and a wider network of collaborators, and the questions these texts raise reflect the shared voice of an influential post-revolutionary generation. This voice can be characterized as anti-fascist, sceptical of essentialist cultural nationalism, critical of political authorities, and interested in the construction of an Ireland which is open to a broad range of cultural influences.

Finally, it is important to note that on a personal level the orientation described above enables O’Nolan to be pragmatic in his choices as well as programmatic in his aesthetics and political agenda. He is a working writer often motivated by financial circumstances, but this does not necessarily run counter to the position on aesthetic autonomy this thesis describes. In the same way that the avant-garde – though associated with revolutionary movements on the left and right – is tactically and strategically engaged with business and mass market culture to further these ends, O’Nolan’s commercial incentives to appeal to the middlebrow, to endlessly court controversy and to produce comically appealing and legible work, actually operate in tandem with the avant-garde characteristics of his work. As a

result we do not encounter, when reading O’Nolan, the desire to divide commercially-incentivized work from work created according to an aesthetic vision in the manner that, for example, critics have sought to separate the cartoons of Jack Yeats from his paintings.²⁷ Instead, as with Kurt Schwitters’s deployment of Dadaist innovations in printing and typography to the development of a successful commercial enterprise and association, O’Nolan provides an example of how a creative body of work can embrace and live out the contradictions of avant-garde art as a component part of the cultural marketplace.²⁸

Raoul Hausmann writes of Dada as the art of transition: ‘[we] are hovering between two worlds: we have broken with the old world before the new one has been formed, and satire, caricature, the grotesque, and puppetry take the stage’.²⁹ The peculiar characteristics of O’Nolan’s work – its accomplished formal dexterity combined with its ability to voice trenchant criticisms without speaking directly – also arise as the product of his generation’s rebellion in a society at the point of transition. In politics as in art, the legitimacy of the forms his circle inherit is brutally compromised, yet the legitimacy of those to replace them has not yet been established. In Eysteinsson or Murphy’s terms, O’Nolan’s practice is an exemplar of the ‘poetics of negation’ which arises in this scenario.³⁰ It witnesses the forced reconciliation of artwork and history in the satirical annihilation of both, with the result that ‘caricature, the grotesque, and puppetry take the stage’.³¹

²⁷ See Matthew Connerty, ‘Selective Memory: Art History and the Comic Strip Work of Jack B. Yeats: Archives and Styles’ in *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 231–48.

²⁸ John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p. 187, and as discussed in chapter one.

²⁹ Original: ‘In dem Zustand des Schwebens zwischen zwei Welten, wenn wir mit der alten gebrochen haben, und die neue noch nicht formen können, tritt die Satire, die Groteske, die Karikatur, der Clown und die Puppe auf’. Raoul Hausmann, ‘Die neue Kunst’ (The New Art), *Die Aktion*, 11 (1921), 281–85 (p. 284), qtd. in Maria Stavrinaki, *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art & History*, trans. by Daniela Ginsburg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 22.

³⁰ Eysteinsson, p. 5; Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 24.

³¹ Raoul Hausmann, ‘Die neue Kunst’, p. 284.

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This bibliography is organized into the following sections:

- I. Works by Brian O’Nolan, Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan, comprising:
 - A. Articles in *Blather* not attributed to any single author
 - B. Works by Brian O’Nolan
 - C. Works by Niall Montgomery
 - D. Works by Niall Sheridan
- II. Critical writing about Brian O’Nolan
- III. Other works and sources

I. Works by Brian O’Nolan, Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan

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